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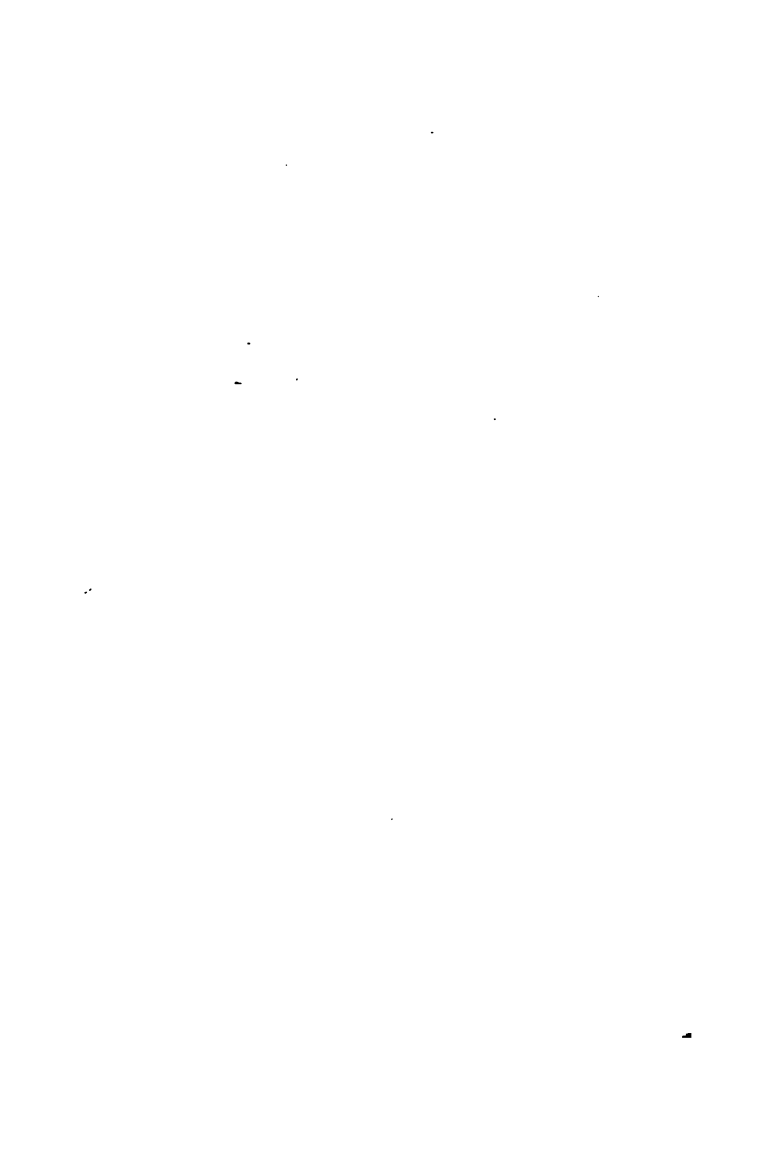
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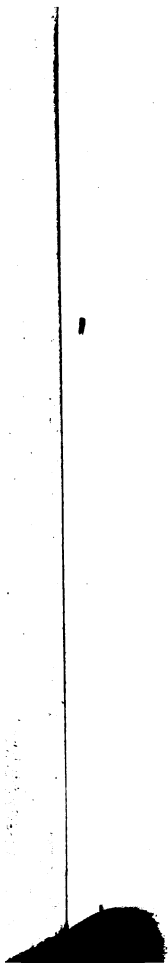


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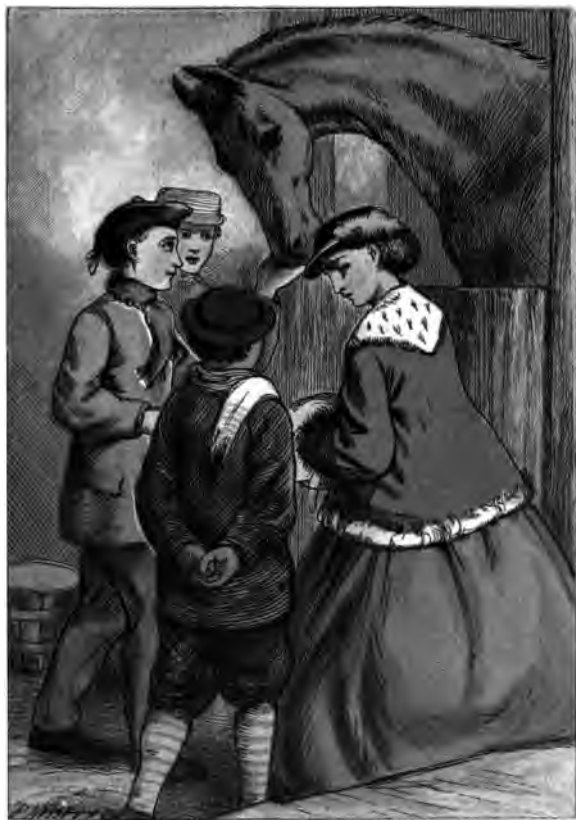












*The Crofton Cousins at the Vicarage.*

THE  
CROFTON COUSINS.

*A Tale for Children.*

BY EMMA MARSHALL.

"Brothers in heart, they hope to gain  
An undivided joy;  
That man may one with man remain  
As boy was one with boy."

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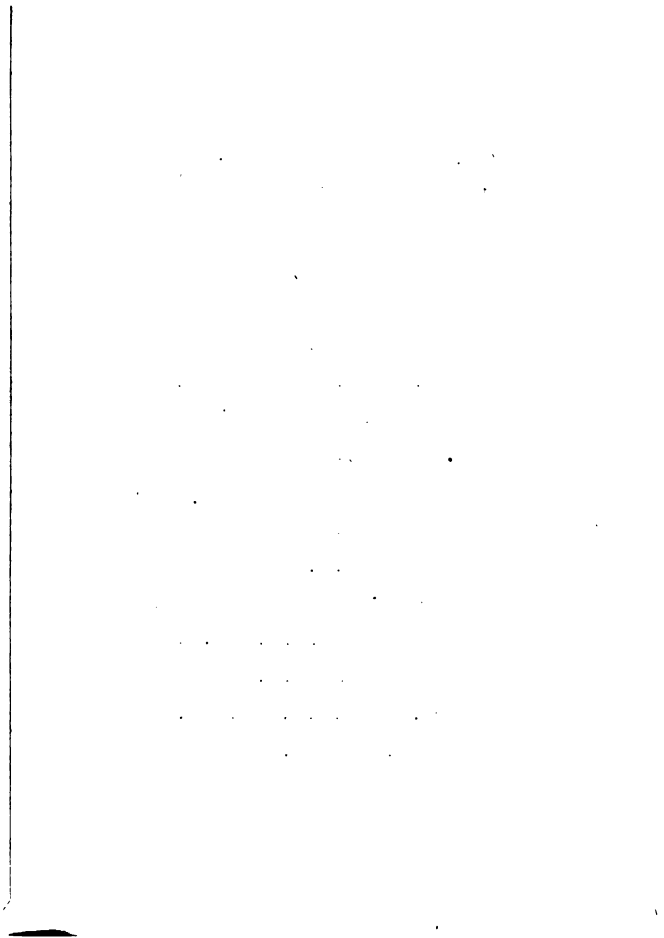
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# THE CROFTON COUSINS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE INVITATION.

“THERE’s the postman ! Oh, mamma ! may we run for the letters ?” and, hardly waiting for a reply, Percy and Harry Crofton had slipped down from their chairs at the table, where they were seated at their lessons, and were rushing out of the room in a moment.

Amy, a gentle girl of eleven years old, was left by her mother’s side, who said, with a half sigh, “What spirits those boys have ! but I wish Percy would be quieter. I have quite made up my mind that he must go to the Grammar School after Christmas.”

“It does not signify so much now, mamma, as there are no other lodgers, except for your sake,” and Amy laid the small white hand, which had been busy turning over the pages of a French dictionary, tenderly on her mother’s.

The little boys soon came back, Percy holding a letter high above his head. “It’s from grandpapa, I am certain, but it has got the Morley post-mark ;

but it's his writing, I know—do look, mamma." Percy gave his mother the letter, and then Amy said, "Come, let mamma read it in peace; go on with your copy, Harry; and look, Percy, here's the word that puzzled us so much in our French reading."

But the "rat-tat" of the postman had unsettled the boys very effectually, and Amy found that curiosity as to the contents of the letter had driven out of Percy's head all remembrance of the translation.

"It is fine and bright now," said Mrs. Crofton, at last. "You may put away your books, children, and go and see if Hannah is ready to go out."

Amy obeyed; but Percy said, "Please tell me if it's from grandpapa, *do* mamma."

"Don't tease mamma, Percy," Amy said, for she saw her mother's face was anxious and perplexed.

"It is too cold for you, Amy, let the boys go alone; there has been a sharp frost, and you could not walk fast enough to keep warm."

Amy looked pleased to stay at home, but she went out of the room with her brothers, and found their warmest gloves and comforters, and rescued Harry's hoop-stick from the top of the wardrobe, in her mother's room, where Hannah had put it when Master Harry had come in so *uproarious* the afternoon before. Then, when Hannah was ready, and the eager boys had departed, Percy rather indignant at going alone with Hannah; Amy went back to her mother.

*Amy was a delicate child; she had a pale face and*

soft light brown hair, her eyes were sweet and loving in their expression, and her voice was the most delightful sound you can imagine. She sang beautifully, and music was her great delight; but Amy Crofton was lame; she could walk without a stick, but she limped very much, and people who passed her by her joyous brothers' side would turn round and look at her, and say, "Poor child!" while really Amy needed no pity. She was very happy.

"Amy, dear!" said her mother, when she had settled with her work-basket by her side, and had just picked up a stray leaf from a geranium in the window, which she was trying to keep through the winter, "the letter is from your grandpapa. He is come to Rookwood Manor, and says he shall not go out of England again for some time. He asks us all to go to Rookwood for the New Year. Would you like it?"

"Oh, mamma!" and Amy's face brightened; "I should like to see papa's dear old house; and it would do you good."

"Yes, Amy, but there is the expense of the journey. I almost doubt if I can afford it. We must keep on this lodging, for it is cheaper and healthier than many—and then we must take Hannah; the boys must have some one to look after them."

"I can, mamma!"

"No, dear; not altogether. You are only too ready to be of use; but little Harry is so young, and I am not strong, alas! or we could manage without poor Hannah at all."



"How much will the journey cost, mamma? I wonder grandpapa does not offer to pay it—he knows you are poor."

"Grandpapa has many things to do with his money, dear, I daresay; it is kind of him to ask us all. Rookwood is a dear old place, even in winter. I knew how you would like it; and then the boys! My Percy will run wild with delight."

"Oh, let us go, mamma, dear! we can save in other things, can't we?"

"We will try, dear. I think it is too good an offer to refuse."

"You have not seen grandpapa since—since papa died."

"No, it is five years since," and Mrs. Crofton sighed again, and there was silence. It was broken at last by Amy bursting forth, as a bird does, into one of her songs. She went on for a minute, and then stopped.

"Do you mind it, mamma?"

"Oh no, darling, I like it," and song after song followed, while the wintry sun came in at the window of the sitting-room, through a gap in the houses opposite, and shone on the furniture of the little room, and found no dusty corners, or untidy places, where all was so scrupulously neat.

Mrs. Crofton had the whole first-floor of the house, and Hannah was her faithful servant, who had lived with her in brighter days, when Mr. Crofton was alive, and the pretty airy nurseries of Acton Vicarage had been gladdened by the sound of many little feet. She had seen her mistress weep over the

graves of three bright-haired boys, and at last over that of the father, who had left her a widow, and Amy, Percy, and Harry fatherless, three years before this time. Thus had come the change to the narrow street of a large town from the pleasant country-house, and pinching and economy had to be practised by those who had never known anything but plenty and comfort. But Mrs. Crofton, in spite of poor health, kept up bravely, educated her children, made their dresses with her own quick fingers, and Mr. Crofton's father, the grandpapa of Rookwood Manor, always received grateful thanks for the small pecuniary help, sent half-yearly, from some continental place of abode, but never heard a word of murmuring or discontent.

The result of Mrs. Crofton's long thought and consideration was, that for her children's sake, the visit to Rookwood Manor must be paid. Their grandfather ought to know them; and how Percy and Harry would enjoy the country, and the rambles in the park, and through the woods, though the trees were bare, and over the wide heath which lay behind Rookwood! So that afternoon, a letter expressing a glad acceptance of old Mr. Crofton's offer was written, and the news of the coming journey shouted by the little boys, and told to Hannah, who said, "How they were ever to get ready by Monday, with two such troublesome children to look after, was more than she could tell."

But it *was* all managed in due time; so at eight o'clock on the Monday before Christmas, the little Croftons, and their mother and Hannah, and the

boxes, were safely packed into the omnibus which called for them, and they had reached the station just as the great clock over the gateway pointed to half-past eight. Mrs. Crofton got the tickets, and the whole party travelled together in a second-class carriage. I will not say how often poor Percy had to be called to order, nor how often during that long day's journey Harry inquired, "When will it be Morley?"

It was Morley at last, though it was quite dark when they were turned out on the platform; and Hannah had sundry fears and hopes about the safety of the five boxes and the two carpet bags, and was sure one was missing. It was not, however; and the children were standing by their mother's side, Amy tired and patient, holding her mother's travelling bag with one hand and little Harry by the other, when a tall gentleman with a long beard and moustache came up and said, in a pleasant voice, to Mrs. Crofton—

"This is Amy, I am sure. I am come to meet you. Well, little people, tired, eh? I am sure you must be; this way!"

"Uncle Hubert, children," said Mrs. Crofton, as she put her hand into his arm, and told them to follow.

Then came a drive, in a large, soft, luxurious carriage, of some miles length, at the end of which all the children were asleep, and were awoke by their mother's voice, "Here we are, dears, wake up!"

"I am not asleep, mamma," said Percy.

And Amy put her hand into her mother's, for she was old enough to know that thoughts of her father were busy in the widow's head as she drew near his early home.

"Oh! what a light!" said little Harry, as the carriage stopped, and the opened door showed a wide hall, with a huge fire blazing at the farther end; and, "Oh! what a dog!" was Percy's exclamation, as a large Newfoundland was seen in the doorway, and gave a short bark, followed directly by a whine of welcome, as Colonel Crofton, Uncle Hubert, got down from the box, and with a "Dear Nep, dear old boy!" helped the children from the carriage, and lifted them one after another into the hall.

Here were servants and attendants; but a very tall white-haired old gentleman advanced to meet them. Amy thought the greeting to her mother less loving than it might have been, and than she expected from "papa's father." She and her little brothers felt strangely confused and frightened, and could scarcely get out "quite well, thank you," in answer to grandpapa's question. The bright lights in the drawing-room made the children's eyes ache, and they could scarcely see the lady who rose from a chair by the fire, and came towards them with a little boy by her side. She seemed so very grand in Amy's eyes, so different in her rich dress and bright ornaments to the figure of her mother in her close-fitting black gown, with its white collar and cuffs. It was Aunt Julia, Colonel Crofton's wife, and the boy was Gilbert Crofton, their cousin.

The first impression of him was not pleasant, for

Gilbert was spoiled and indulged, and was about as full of self-satisfaction as a boy of ten years old could be. He stood looking at his three little cousins, but did not offer a hand of greeting. Percy, in particular, at that moment registered a dislike to Gilbert in his heart, for he heard him say, as they followed his mother from the drawing-room, "What makes the girl limp so? she wants a crutch." I daresay Gilbert would have said, had anyone reproved him, "Oh! she did not hear;" but no one did reprove him, and Amy's colour rushed to her face, and a sort of fear sprang up in her heart that they should not be happy at Rookwood Manor after all. The whole party met for tea in the library, and it was rather a silent meal. Gilbert talked the most, and seemed master of most things—from the glass dish of marmalade, to which he helped himself twice after his mother had said, "No, Gilbert, darling, you will be ill"—but not of the head of the house, his tall stately grandfather, who seemed to be the only person he minded.

Mrs. Crofton went up with her three children directly after tea. Two large rooms opening into each other were ready for them, large fires in both, and comfortable crimson curtains drawn over the windows. Hannah was there to put the little boys to bed. Amy always had her mother's help. Mrs. Crofton thought Amy silent, and supposed she was over-tired. When the little prayers were all said, and each little sleeper carefully covered from the cold winter's night by Hannah's hand, Mrs. Crofton bent to kiss them all. The boys, especially Percy,

were full of wonder at the big house and all the grand furniture; but Percy's most decided opinion was, "I can't bear Aunt Julia, and I hate Gilbert."

"Hush, Percy, hush; good night!" said his mother.

But he was surprised at Amy saying too, "Mamma, dear, I hope we shall be happy here, but I am afraid of Aunt Julia and Gilbert."

---

## CHAPTER II.

### ROOKWOOD MANOR.

THE bell rang for prayers at nine o'clock the next morning. The little Croftons had been dressed and ready some time, and had read their Bible verses to their mother and said their hymns, and began to be very hungry indeed. Amy took her mother's hand, and the little boys ran on quickly down the wide staircase and through the large hall to the dining-room. Only grandpapa and Uncle Hubert were there; the latter read a psalm for the day and two or three collects, and then the long file of servants departed and entered with the hot toast and coffee and other good things. Mrs. Hubert Crofton and Gilbert appeared. Percy and Harry were quite puzzled what to choose for breakfast, there were so many things; and Percy coloured when his grandfather said,—

"Don't point to what you wish for, young sir."

"I didn't know the name of it," said Percy, sturdily.

Colonel Crofton laughed; but his mother's "Percy!" checked him, and he said no more.

Amy was shyly answering Aunt Julia's questions, and dreading the time when she must get up and leave the room, for fear Gilbert should say any more about her lameness.

"Now, Gilbert," said his father, when breakfast was over, "you had better take a run this fine morning and show your cousins the park and the garden. Will you come, too?" he said, turning to Mrs. Crofton.

"Yes, I should like it very much; but Amy and I cannot walk fast, so the little boys may set off first, if Gilbert will take care of them."

"I am as old as Gilbert, mamma," said Percy, with dignity, drawing himself up.

"Not quite, Percy; but I think you are as tall."

"Stand up, Gilbert," said his grandfather, "and let us see."

Gilbert rather unwillingly obeyed.

The two boys were a great contrast—Percy, so bright and healthy in appearance; Gilbert, sickly and drooping—hair, eyes, and complexion all one pale yellow. Old Mr. Crofton looked some time at Percy, and said, half aloud—

"He's very like his mother. Come, run off, if you are going."

The children needed no second bidding, and were

soon running past the windows of the dining-room on the broad terrace walk.

"Dear," said Mrs. Hubert Crofton, "Gilbert has no gloves on; do run after him, papa, and order him back; he will get chilblains."

Away went Colonel Crofton, and his mother said—

"Your children seem little giants, Amy. Gilbert is so delicate—a constant anxiety."

"Is he? I know a little of anxiety, too, for my Amy."

"Ah! to be sure. What doctor have you had for her?"

"One or two have seen her; but it is contraction of the hip-joint, and incurable. She is very happy and contented, however, which is a comfort."

"Ah!" said Aunt Julia, leaning back in her chair, and holding up the *Times* between her face and the blazing fire; "and then a girl will get on better than a boy. If it had been Percy it would have been much worse, depending, as he must, on himself for a living."

It was not quite a pleasant speech, and Mrs. Crofton went to find Amy, and get ready for the walk with Uncle Hubert. He was very good-natured and kind, taking Amy's hand and giving her support without seeming to do so.

"We must look up the boys," he said. "I dare say Master Gilbert has gone clean through the shrubbery to the stable to show them his pony. By-the-bye, Amy, you shall have a ride on 'Diamond!'"



“ I am afraid I should tumble off, Uncle Hubert.”

“ Not you ! we’ll begin at a foot’s pace. It is pleasant to be at old Rookwood again, is it not ?” he said, turning to Mrs. Crofton.

It was a bright winter’s morning, the sun shining over the moorland, which stretched away behind Rookwood, and lighting up the trunks of the leafless trees in the plantation, and glancing on the dark glossy leaves of the holly bushes and Portugal laurels.

“ There are the old glens where the rooks build in the spring days ; look, Amy,” said her mother. “ And there is the head of Glen Banon that I have so often told you of.”

They had reached the shrubbery just then, and were getting near the stables, when the sound of children’s voices was heard. The tones were not at all happy ones, and in another moment the little boys were found, Gilbert covered with dirt and dust, and Percy with an excited, angry face, looking on, and saying—

“ It served you right ! You coward to cry !”

Percy was very near crying, too, as his mother sprang towards him.

“ What is it, Percy ? Oh ! Percy, what have you done ?”

“ Pushed him down in a rage, and I am glad of it ! He says you were papa’s poor cousin, and had no right to marry him ; and he says that he is the heir to all this, and that the estate is entailed, and I—that we——”

Percy could get out no more. Colonel Crofton

had gone up to Gilbert, and was brushing the dust off his coat.

"That will do, Gilbert. Come, you are not hurt; but it's a bad look-out if you are going to quarrel with your cousin. Shake hands and forget it. You ought to beg Percy's pardon for your rude speeches. Come, shake hands, and then we will look after Diamond."

But Mrs. Crofton had turned away with Percy, and was going towards home. Amy looked so distressed, and little Harry ready to cry, too; but Gilbert only sulkily said,—

"I'll have nothing more to do with him, and shall tell grandpapa to have him sent away."

"Be quiet, sir!" said his father. "Now, Amy, let's go in with Harry, and we will see about the side saddle, and leave this young gentleman to go home to his mother, if he chooses."

Meanwhile Percy and his mamma walked on in silence till they reached the house. Percy's hot cheeks had cooled now, and when he followed his mother into their room, and she shut the door, he was quite subdued and gentle.

"Percy, tell me how this happened."

"Mamma, Gilbert is——"

"Stop, Percy! I did not ask you what he is; I ask you how you could grieve me so by quarrelling with your cousin, the first morning, too, and forgetting yourself so far as to push him down?"

"He said so many horrid things; and that you, mamma—you—grandpapa was angry with *you*—and then I pushed him down—and I would do it again."

"My boy, you don't show your love to me by this. Remember, Percy, 'he that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city.' Now, Percy, if you cannot control yourself here, we must go home again. But I hope you will, and set Gilbert a good example, and show him how forbearing you can be. You may win him, at last, to be good friends; who can tell? Percy, you must find him when they come home and beg his pardon for pushing him down, and let there be no more scenes like this. You had better sit here now; get a book and read. Here is one I brought from home. I have to go down and talk to your grandpapa in the study. Oh! Percy," said his mother, kissing him, "your father was so good, and this was his home—and here he was a little boy like you. Don't do anything he would have disapproved, for my sake!"

"It was because I loved you so!" said poor Percy, in a choked voice. "Why don't they love you here?—they ought."

"I did displease grandpapa once, dear boy. He thought papa and me too young to marry, and perhaps we were; and I had lived at Rookwood nearly all my life, and grandpapa never wished me to be his daughter, though he was kind to me as his niece. You cannot understand more; but you will be my comfort, I know."

"I'll try," said Percy; "there's no one half as good as you, I know that!" and with another kiss Mrs. Crofton left him.

Amy and Harry did not come in for an hour. Each had a ride on Diamond, and both were delighted.

"Only it 'was such a pity you were not there, Percy," said his sister. "Have you seen Gilbert?"

"No; he is with Aunt Julia, I daresay. Amy, don't you hate him?"

"Hush, Percy! No, I can't say I like him, but let us all be as kind to him as we can, and *make* him like us; that will be the best way."

"Yes, and Percy," said little Harry, "do you know there's to be a grand party here on New Year's Eve, and Uncle Hubert says we shall have all sorts of fun? Isn't Uncle Hubert nice? He has been telling us all about the bull-fights in Spain, and how Aunt Julia went to see one; and oh! Percy, there's such a beautiful white bullock in the field, and such a host of turkeys and things in the farm-yard. We went all round, didn't we, Amy?"

"Yes. Now, Harry, we had better do our lessons. It is quite like a separate room, this deep window. Look, here are our books; let us begin, it will please mamma."

Hannah came in to replenish the fire, and listened to Harry's delightful accounts for a few minutes.

"And you like it, too, don't you, Hannah?"

"Oh! it's all very grand and fine, but I shan't break my heart when the month's up, I can tell you. Mrs. Bond, the housekeeper, is well enough; she's been asking for you all to take tea in her room this afternoon, with her, and me, and Mr. Brooks; so you must ask your mamma, Miss Amy, dear. There! I hope you won't be falling off that little frisky thing of a pony."

"Oh! no, Hannah, it's so nice, and such a rest to

me, and does not give me the old pain at all. Come, Percy, let's get a page of 'Le Petit Precepteur' ready for mamma. I know she will like us to go on, as if we were at home."

"I am thinking of having to beg Gilbert's pardon," said Percy. "I promised mamma I would, but it's horrid!"

Mrs. Crofton did not return till nearly lunch time, then the children got ready to go down with her. Percy saw his mother looked very pale, and that she had been crying. He thought he had been the cause, and when he got downstairs to the dining-room he walked straight up to Gilbert, who was seated by his mother, and holding out his hand, said,

"I beg your pardon, Gilbert, for pushing you down; I am sorry if I hurt you."

Percy held out his hand, but Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, and only grumbled out something like "I don't care."

Aunt Julia had evidently heard Gilbert's story, and she said—

"Sit down to your dinner, Percy. You might have hurt Gilbert very seriously."

Percy coloured and obeyed; but his grandfather had watched what had passed, and, to Percy's astonishment, called him to come and sit by him, and said—

"If you were wrong, Percy, you have made a generous apology. I am sorry Gilbert shows himself so little of a gentleman as not to accept it."

From that moment Percy and his grandpapa were better friends; it was a step in the right direction,

and seemed to take a weight from his mother's heart.

That evening, after dinner, when the children were all in the drawing-room, Aunt Julia said she would play and they could dance. There were only boys to dance, however, and so it was given up, Amy saying—

“I wish I could, but I can only sing. I love music so, Aunt Julia, do play!”

“What can you sing? Let us hear,” said Colonel Crofton.

“The ‘Three Little Kittens,’ and ‘Old Mother Goose,’” said Gilbert, scornfully.

“Yes, if you like,” Amy answered, quite composedly; “but other things, too. Mamma, choose one.”

“If Aunt Julia will play ‘He shall feed His flock like a shepherd,’ you can get through that very nicely, dear, though your songs without the piano are my favourites.”

Aunt Julia played a few notes, and then said,

“It is a difficult song; but come here, Amy, and try.”

The sweet, clear, ringing voice that now arose evidently surprised every one. Grandpapa laid down his book, took off his spectacles, and gave himself up to enjoyment. Uncle Hubert leaned against the chimney-piece, and said every now and then to Amy's mother, “beautiful!” while the colour came and went on Mrs. Crofton's face, and tears were all but falling. Gilbert and Percy and little Harry were playing bagatelle at the farther end of

the room, but the click-click of the balls suddenly ceased, and Gilbert, who had an ear for music, drew near the piano, and looked at his little cousin with surprise. When the song was done, it was pleasant to see Amy return to her mother's side, and say simply,

"Did I sing it well to-night, dear mamma? The piano is higher than ours at home."

There was no conceit—no elated toss of the head at the praise bestowed on her.

"Come here, little one," said her grandfather. "Why, you are a nightingale, isn't she, Julia?"

"Yes, you ought to be a chorister, Amy. Who taught you?"

"Mamma, of course!" put in Percy.

"I did not teach her much," said Mrs. Crofton. "Amy has sung from the time she was a baby."

"Well," said Colonel Crofton, "I must take you to Colerich Cathedral some day while you are here, that's very certain."

"Oh! Uncle Hubert, I should like that, and then I should hear the boys sing, that mamma has so often told me of."

"Not those boys, Amy; they have long since gone forth from Colerich Cathedral, and are grown men now; but there are others to fill their places."

"I say," said Gilbert, "sing again, will you?"

"Oh! yes, if you like, and grandpapa wishes. I can always get on best when I work; may I go on with my knitting, mamma?"

Again, as a bird pours out melody from its heart because it cannot help it, the little lame girl's voice was raised in the home of her fathers.

When the children went to bed, Mrs. Crofton accompanied them. She always read with them, and headed their evening prayer.

"Gilbert ought to go to bed, too," said Colonel Crofton; "he sits up much too late."

"Oh! I can't go like a baby," said Gilbert. "Papa, play a game of draughts."

"Well, one, but that's all."

But several games followed the first, and when Mrs. Crofton returned, Gilbert was still in the drawing-room. Again and again his mother quietly advised him to leave off; but Gilbert had no idea of obedience, and not till his grandfather interposed with rather a stern "Gilbert, do as you are told," did the young gentleman allow Brooks to be sent for, and consented to depart.

"Has Gilbert had a governess or tutor?" asked Mrs. Crofton.

"Oh! yes, we have tried several," said his mother; "but Gilbert is so sensitive and so clever it is almost impossible to find one suited to him; then our wandering life has so unsettled him." Colonel Crofton gave a significant "*Humph!*" "The names of all our governesses, my dear, would fill a good-sized sheet of paper."

"Yes, it strikes me," said old Mr. Crofton, "Gilbert wants a firmer hand than he has yet had over him. It will have to end in school, Julia!"

"If you want to kill him!" said his mother. "A delicate boy like him!"

"Well, well! How has Percy been taught?" said Colonel Crofton.



"I have taught him hitherto," said his mother; "but I am afraid his advancement in boy-learning is nothing very great."

"You have taught him obedience, however," said his grandfather; and then no more passed on the subject.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### MRS. BOND'S STORIES.

SEVERAL days of bleak easterly wind followed, and the children could not get out much; but there was plenty of amusement within doors. There were games in the hall and billiard-room; and to Amy and her brothers, endless amusement in going over the house again and again, and finding out all the nooks and corners with which Rookwood Manor abounded.

It was the day before Christmas, and a hard frost had set in, when, in the afternoon, the three children were gathered in Mrs. Bond's room, where they generally had tea. Mrs. Bond had reigned at Rookwood many years. She could tell tales of Christmas parties and festivities long ago—of times when Rookwood Manor resounded with mirth and gladness, and Master Hubert and Master Ralph (Amy's father) were boys at home for the holidays. Percy, she declared, was his mother's living image, while Harry and Amy were like their father.

"You knew mamma, too, then?" said Percy.

"To be sure I did. She was as nice a little lady

as I ever saw. Master Ralph and she took kindly to each other from the first moment of her coming here—a little orphan as she was. She had always a tender heart. I daresay she has told you, Miss Amy, of her asking your grandpapa to forgive poor Sarah?"

"No, what was it?" said the three children, eagerly; "we like a tale so much, Mrs. Bond, do tell us!"

"Well, we had a nursemaid in those days named Sarah. She was a poor girl, of honest parents, who lived in Colerich, which, you know, is about ten miles off. Sarah had a letter one morning to say her mother was ill, and asking her to get leave to come over and see her. The house was full of company, and it was certainly not at all convenient, but still I pitied the poor girl when I saw her crying and taking on, and I said I would get her work done, and manage without her, if Mr. Crofton would give her leave to go. Your grandpapa was always particular, you know, and always managed everything just as he does now, and I no more dare give Sarah leave to go home without telling him, than I dare fly. So I went with Sarah to the door of the study, and told Mr. Crofton how very bad her mother was, and how I would manage to get her work done. Well, Mr. Crofton said she might go for two days, but she must be home by Christmas Eve, when a large party was to be here. He said, 'Remember, you forfeit your place if you stay any longer, unless your mother is likely to die, or much worse.' Away went Sarah early next morning in the carrier's

cart, and we got on very well. She was to come home the middle of Thursday, and I never shall forget how sorry I was when Brown, the Colerich carrier, came into the yard on Thursday forenoon with a lot of game and parcels from Colerich market, and no Sarah. She hadn't sent a message either, and I did blame her for that. Brown said he had seen nothing of her, and she had told him she would be coming back that day, so he had waited in the Eagle Yard, at Colerich, some five minutes, expecting her to come. Well, I only hoped Mr. Crofton would forget to ask for Sarah, and that she would yet come; but he always had a cup of coffee in his study at five o'clock, and Sarah always took it to him. The time came, and I had to make the coffee; I took it myself. He looked up as the door opened, and said, quick as lightning, 'Is Sarah come home?' 'No, sir.' 'Is Brown's cart come?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Very well, you may tell Sarah, Mrs. Bond, that she may walk back again to Colerich; she is no longer my servant.' 'Oh! sir,' I ventured to say, 'her mother's so poor, and her father bedridden; she may yet come, sir! You said Thursday.' 'I give her till eight o'clock this evening; if there is no message, or she does not appear, it must be as I said—Sarah leaves my service!' The snow was thick on the ground, and we could scarcely hear the carriage wheels as they rolled up the drive for the party. They rolled up and they rolled back at past midnight, and yet Sarah never came. The next morning, just as we were going to church, the poor girl came walking

up the side path. Mr. Crofton was just coming out with the two young gentlemen, Miss Ethel, and little Miss Amabel. Sarah looked white and tired, but she was passing on towards the kitchen entrance, when Mr. Crofton said, all stern, and cool-like, 'Sarah, is your mother worse?' 'No, sir,' said Sarah, trembling, 'she's better.' 'Why weren't you here yesterday?' 'I missed the carrier, sir, and—' 'That will do; you can leave my service to-morrow!' 'Oh! sir, what will become of my mother and me? Oh! pray don't send me away!' But Mr. Crofton, as if he did not hear, walked on, and began to talk to a gentleman about the sharp frost. Little Miss Amabel had hold of her uncle's hand; he was always strict and sharp with the young gentlemen, and even Miss Ethel, but never with Miss Amabel. They say she was so like her aunt, who, you know, was your grandmamma, and who died when Master Ralph was born. There, I now fancy I see Miss Amabel running back to Sarah, who just got into the kitchen, and there sobbed and cried as if her heart would break. The worst was, she had gone out of Colerich with a cousin the evening before, which she had no right to do, going home, as she did, on purpose to see her sick mother, as we thought. 'Don't cry, Sarah,' said little Miss Amabel, 'don't cry. I will ask Uncle Gilbert to let you stay, and I know he will. I must run after him to church now, but you wait till the evening, and I am certain Uncle Gilbert will forgive you.' I was rung for to go to the study that afternoon—on Mr. Crofton's desk were Sarah's wages, which

he told me to give her, and order her to leave the next morning. I dare say nothing, but quick there came Miss Amabel and Master Ralph. 'Uncle Gilbert, I want you so to give me something this Christmas time!' 'What now, niece, were you not pleased with your present this morning?' 'Oh! yes, but I want something else; promise, will you? Poor Sarah, do forgive her and let her stay; her father is a cripple and her mother so poor, and she always hands them half her wages. Oh! Uncle Gilbert, *do* forgive her to please me.' Mr. Crofton looked angry at first, for he always would have his way, and what he said was done. 'And it's just the same now,' said Mrs. Bond, with a sigh. But who could resist Miss Amabel, with those sweet eyes of hers, as she climbed up on the back of the high study chair, and said again—'Do please forgive Sarah! it's Christmas-day, you know!' 'No, little Amabel, I must keep my word,' said Mr. Crofton. 'The other maids and men will be gadding about without leave, if I take Sarah back.' 'But, Uncle Gibbie,' said the child, in a low voice, while her long silky curls swept over his face; 'Uncle Gibbie, it says, "Be ye tender-hearted, *forgiving* one another." Don't you know? I was afraid of staying away longer, but I had not been back in the kitchen long before Miss Amabel came springing in. 'Sarah, you will be good always after this; Uncle Gilbert says you may stay.' Sarah never forgot that Christmas-day, and lived here for years, got to be upper housemaid, and is married to a gardener at Colerich. 'It was

a pretty Christmas gift for Miss Amabel to ask, wasn't it now?"

"Ah! Mrs. Bond, I like so to hear it, and to know all about mamma," said Amy, "and papa too. I fancy I can see mamma a little girl here when you are telling them. But peace and quiet were over now," as Mrs. Bond said truly when Master Gilbert came swinging into the room.

"What are you all doing here?" he asked. "I have my tea in mamma's sitting-room. What babies you are to get it with the maids! But I say, Mrs. Bond, that's quince jam, I know; give me a little, will you?"

"If you speak nicely, Master Gilbert. *No*," said Mrs. Bond, with offended dignity, "no young *gentleman* goes to help himself with a teaspoon in that fashion," snatching a spoon from Gilbert's hand.

"For shame, Master Crofton," said Brooks.

But Gilbert was bent on an attack on the jam; he seized another spoon, as Mrs. Bond captured the first, and dived down into the pot with all his force.

"You shan't," said Percy, struggling to get the spoon from him.

"Percy, Percy!" interfered Amy, "it is no concern of yours."

"Leave go, Master Percy," said Hannah.

"You let me alone, will you?" said Gilbert. "Everything in this house is mine, or will be one day."

This touched the sore place in Percy's proud spirit again. He was a great deal stronger than Gilbert, and could easily have thrown him down,

and carried the point, but his mother's words came back about "ruling the spirit," and though his face was crimson with anger he let go Gilbert's hand, and sat down.

"There, it's no use your firing away at me, you know. That's excellent jam," he said, smacking his lips provokingly. "Thank you, Mrs. Bond, I shall come to tea in the housekeeper's room another day."

"You'll wait till you are asked, sir," said Mrs. Bond, bridling, "your foreign manners ain't what I have been used to at Rookwood, and I shall tell your grandpapa, sir, you may depend."

"It's you I came for, Amy," said Gilbert; "I want you to come and play bagatelle till dinner—come along."

Amy felt very much inclined to say no, but she thought a moment, and then remembering her resolution to *make* Gilbert like them, and to set him a good example, and bidding Mrs. Bond good-by with "Thank you for our nice tea here," she left the room with Gilbert.

"I never saw the like of it," said Mrs. Bond, when the door closed; "he is spoiled and ruined, that child, and where it will end I don't know. As to you, Master Percy, you behave like a gentleman, and a good thing it would be if you were to be master here some day instead of your cousin, though I shan't live to see the day; it isn't likely."

Percy felt pleased, and this foolish speech of good Mrs. Bond's sank into his heart. His mother could not think what elated Percy so much that

evening; and was surprised to hear him crossly refuse Henry when he asked him to come into the library to fetch a book of birds grandpapa had given them leave to have, and which was on the second shelf, and too high for little Henry's arm. Percy answered with an important air, that he was too busy finishing a drawing for Uncle Hubert, and he mustn't bother him. Henry was a good little boy, and said no more, but contented himself with another book. Then Gilbert pushed past the table at which Percy sat, and quite by accident shook his hand as he was making a very straight stroke to the steeple of the church he was drawing.

"There, now, you have spoiled it," said Percy, impatiently. "What a bother you are, Gilbert!"

"You are not to speak so to me; I'll do it again, if you do."

Percy looked very angry, and would have answered, but a look from his mother from her seat by the fire, where she was talking to grandpapa, checked him.

Boys cannot be thankful enough when God has given them a good mother, who will lead them by gentle influence and watch over them with a tender love, which is quick to see their faults, and to point them out, yet ever ready to forgive an error and to encourage them in the right way. This visit of Percy Crofton's to Rookwood would have been bad indeed for him had not his mother been with him. As it was, it was of use to him, and he learned some things which he remembered all his life.



Mrs. Crofton saw something was wrong with Percy that night, but when she went with her children for the evening reading in her room, nothing was said. Percy kept silence, and his mother thought it better to wait till something led to the subject.

"To-morrow will be Christmas-day, mamma. There's such a large dinner for all the tenants and people on the farm, to be in the laundry. Mrs. Bond says there'll be fifteen plum puddings—fancy!" said little Henry.

"Yes; and mamma," said Amy, "we have been hearing a tale about you in the housekeeper's room, such a nice tale 'about poor Sarah.'"

Mrs. Crofton sighed, and then smiled at Amy's eagerness, and—

"Mrs. Bond remembers you quite a little girl, mamma."

"It's six years since they've been at Rookwood for Christmas," said Percy; "only once since Uncle Hubert married. Mrs. Bond says it's a great pity, and it's all Aunt Julia's fault, and——"

"I think we have heard enough about what Mrs. Bond says to-night, Percy; it is not for a little boy of nine years old to sit in judgment on his elders. Grandpapa has had reasons for leaving Rookwood; first, it was because Aunt Ethel was so ill."

"She died, didn't she, mamma," asked Amy, "when I was a little girl?"

"A very little girl you mean, Amy. Yes, at Florence the first winter. But now let us read; Harry's eyes are all but shut now, and then Amy shall sing us a Christmas hymn."

## CHAPTER IV.

## CHRISTMAS DAY.

SNOW covered the ground on Christmas-day, and though not deep it was enough to delight the children, who had only seen it in a town, where its pure whiteness is soon lost by the tread of many feet, and the falling of smoke and blacks from chimneys. But here at Rookwood it was all one dazzling mantle, lying on every tree and shrub, and sparkling in the sun, as the clouds cleared away and left a pale blue wintry sky overhead.

The path to church lay for a little while over the moor at the back of the manor, the village lying to the right, in a valley, where there were but few cottages, and three or four farms, all belonging to Mr. Crofton's estate. After breakfast, grandpapa said—

“Who are coming to church?”

“Everybody,” said Percy.

“Shall we get ready, mamma?”

“I shall not go,” said Aunt Julia, “a morning like this, nor shall I allow Gilbert.”

“Nonsense,” said Colonel Crofton. “What would you have? It is a perfect winter's morning. The snow isn't deep, and they have swept a path out by the side gate.”

Aunt Julia shrugged her shoulders, and said—

“She could not allow Gilbert to risk the cold.”

The opposition made Gilbert very anxious to go to

church, and as usual he had his way, and the whole party, except Aunt Julia, were warmly equipped and ready for their walk by half-past ten.

Amy kept close to her mother and Uncle Hubert, the boys went on in front with their grandpapa.

"Don't hurry, Amy," said her uncle; "you ought to have had Diamond."

"Oh! no, Uncle Hubert, I can get on beautifully, only I don't wish you to walk slow for me."

"What are the boys calling out for?"

"Oh! the little pond is frozen, I daresay that's it; we shall get some skating. Percy will be the man for that."

The pond was just at the outskirts of the grounds, and was covered with good substantial ice, which the biting east wind of the last three days had made firm.

"Is the pond deep?" said Amy.

"Yes," said her mother. "Do you remember, Hubert, poor James Dayton falling in when he was trying to get the water-lily for Ethel?"

And then her mother and uncle began to talk of past days, of which she knew nothing, and she was silent till they got to the church door. Here, in the porch, was the rector, newly appointed, a young Mr. Foster, who was talking to Mr. Crofton.

"So I see you have dressed up the church in grand style. Well, well! as you like. We shall come to restoring it next, I suppose."

"I hope so, indeed," said Mr. Foster.

"Oh! mamma," said Percy, "it's so pretty;" but little Amy was silent as she followed the others

to the old family pew of the Croftons, in the north transept of the little church. It was quite like a little room, with its fire-place, and cushions, and hassocks; and there was not much temptation to look about, as only the head of Mr. Foster, when in the pulpit, was visible to the children in the Manor pew.

Monuments were above it to numerous Croftons of days gone by. Amy could not help reading the names of the later dates—"Ethelreda, who died at Florence, aged 27," and the "Rev. Ralph Enfield Crofton, the rector of Acton, Somersetshire, who died March 1st, 1850, aged 31." Amy knew why her mother's head was bent, and her veil drawn over her face, long after the village choir had shouted from the gallery the first verse of the Christmas hymn.

Gilbert walked home with Amy and her mother.

"Whatever we come to church for on Christmas-day puzzles me! It's a day for merrymaking, and giving things and dinners; but I don't see the use of church!"

"Oh! Gilbert!" said Amy. "Why, Gilbert, it is the annual rejoicing for the great gift; should we not publicly give thanks for that?"

"I don't understand," said Gilbert. "Aunt Amabel," after a moment's pause, "I like you and Amy to be here, but not Percy, there's the truth. Percy doesn't like me, and I——"

Mrs. Clifton smiled, and felt rather surprised. It was an honest confession, and an interest in Gilbert seemed to spring up in her heart.

“What do you laugh for, Aunt Amabel? why, mamma would be in a rage, if anyone said they didn’t like me.”

“Gilbert, I was amazed at your speaking out. I wonder if your mamma will let you come and be with us every evening at lessons? Ask her, Gibbie?”

“It’s my holidays, now,” said Gilbert. My new tutor isn’t to come till nearly the end of January; but I’ll come, and if I’m tired, I may go, I suppose.”

“You must ask your mother’s leave first, Gilbert, and when you come I will undertake to keep you.”

Amy looked up at her mother, doubtfully, as much as to say, it was an end to all peace with Percy, if Gilbert came; but though she thought of the scene in Mrs. Bond’s room the day before, she did not repeat it. Amy had been taught never to tell a story, which would bring anyone into trouble, or make others think harshly of them.

The rest of Christmas-day was happy. The most bountiful dinner was prepared for the poorer neighbours, and it was a very pretty sight. Old Mr. Crofton went round, and in his own stately way spoke to the tenants, and showed a marvellous memory, in asking about the families of each, and recollecting the faces of boys, who had been little children when he last kept Christmas at Crofton, and of boys who had grown into men. Most of the guests murmured something about being “happy to see the family back again,” and the mothers whispered words of admiration, in “bless them, how well they look!” As the four grandchildren

followed old Mr. Crofton round the table, Percy's eyes were radiant, and his cheek flushed with pleasure. What a pity that he should hear Mrs. Bond say to some one, who asked : " No, that light-haired one is Colonel Crofton's son, and the heir—more's the pity—the other is worth ten of him in looks and everything." Colonel Crofton made a good hearty English speech, and then a glass of wine went round, and there was great drinking of healths, and then Colonel Crofton whispered to Amy, and Amy went and whispered to her mother. Aunt Julia heard what the whisper was, and said, " Oh ! it's not worth while singing to this sort of people ; we have been here quite long enough. The smell of the roast beef makes me quite faint."

But scarcely any notice was taken of Aunt Julia's remark, and Colonel Crofton went to the head of the table, and asked in a clear voice, " who would like a song ? Those that would, hold up their hands."

Immediately every hand, rough, working, homely hands, were raised ; and Amy said—

" Shall I, mamma ?"

" Yes, dear, you are not afraid."

" No ; I should be, if they were grand ladies and gentlemen ; come and stand by me, Percy."

And then the brother and sister went together to the end of the room, and Amy, lifted on a table by her uncle, her face just a little flushed, and her soft eyes more lustrous than usual—Percy standing by her, she began, in rich low tones, getting stronger as she went on, a " Christmas Carol," which her

mother had translated from the German, and she had adapted to the music.

Another and another followed, and it was curious to see the mixture of wonder and delight with which the people listened. And, "thank you, miss, I'm sure," was heard, as Amy stopped at last, and was lifted down from the table.

"It was like one of the angels singing, I am sure, bless her!" said one old man.

Mr. Foster, who was there, was much struck by Amy simply saying—

"I am so glad you like it, I will come and see you at home, and sing again, if you will let me."

"There ain't a bit of pride in her," said old Giles, as the children left the room. "What a pity she's lame; but there! God makes the back fit for the load it has to carry."

"She's like her father," said another; "but what a chap her brother is! why, his eye is so keen and bright, he looks through and through you. There ain't much love lost between him and master, that will be here, some day."

"No, that's plain enough."

"The niece give a look, when that youngster pushed past to get at the top of the table, next his father."

But the company rose at this moment, and the laundry was cleared of the tables, for the Christmas games which followed for the young, while the elders gathered round the blazing log-fire, and a select few of the women were invited to take a cup of tea in the housekeeper's room.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE CHORISTERS AT COLERICH CATHEDRAL.

THE next morning, after breakfast, Gilbert said—

“Papa, when shall we have the skates?”

“I was thinking about it,” said Colonel Crofton; “and fancy we could not do better than drive over to Colerich, let Amy see the cathedral, and hear the service, and do our shopping, getting the skates amongst the rest.”

“Oh, how jolly!” said Percy; “may we, mamma?”

“It’s too cold to drive into Colerich,” said grandpapa.

“Not for me, I’m a boy,” said Percy; “and cold does me good.”

“Not for me,” said little Harry.

“Oh! may I muffle up and go, mamma?” said Amy.

Her mother looked doubtful.

“How long does it take, Hubert?”

“Well, if Amy is to hear the service, we cannot be home till near six. The close carriage will hold most of us, and the boys can ride in the back seat. Julia is sure not to go.”

Aunt Julia had not appeared at breakfast, but Gilbert said—

“Mamma won’t care about it. She has got three new books to read with big print. She was at it in bed just now.”



Old Mr. Crofton shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, if you go, the carriage ought to be round by eleven. The horses are rough-shod, Hubert? The roads are very slippery, for the sun melts the ice in the day, and it froze sharper than ever last night."

"Oh, yes; I gave orders about that the other day. Well, now, you'll all be ready; I will go and order the carriage. 'Muffle up well,' as Amy said, mind."

"No lessons, mamma?" said Percy, anxiously.

"Yes," said Gilbert, "and I'm coming to try my hand."

"You!" said his father, as he was leaving the room; "I should like to see you at lessons for once."

Mrs. Crofton looked at her watch.

"It must be a holiday to-day, Gilbert; it is just ten, and if we are all to be ready by eleven, there is no use in settling to regular lessons. Besides, I made the condition that you asked your mother's leave."

"Well, so I did, and she said I might." Gilbert's tone and manner were not pleasant when he spoke to his superiors, and he added, "I expect you don't want me; I see through it!"

"I don't want you," Percy began, "and you ought not to speak to *my* mother so!"

"Hush! Percy!"

Percy stopped, but his brow was clouded, and his grandfather laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Hot and hasty! Why, Percy, it is like a train of gunpowder."

Percy twisted himself from under his grandfather's hand, and darted out of the room.

"There is time for our first lesson, Gilbert," said Mrs. Crofton. "Come into my room, if you like."

Gilbert was pleased, and followed his aunt, Amy, and Harry. Mrs. Crofton took no notice of Percy, who was already there, and tossed about the books, and seemed in no very placable mood.

"You can look over with me, Gibbie, dear," said his aunt; "now, children."

They all opened their Bibles and read a verse in turn. It was the story of the conversion of St. Paul. When it was finished, Mrs. Crofton said—

"There are many lessons which this might teach us; but perhaps none is more striking than the humility it tells about of him who was once so proud and confident. Can you not imagine you see the young man Saul ready to hold the clothes of them who stoned the martyr Stephen, his eye flashing, his head erect, his whole bearing that of a man who thought a great deal of himself? For Saul was great then in his own eyes! Then how eager he was to get men and women to prison—how eager to assert that Jesus of Nazareth was *nothing*, and to blaspheme that holy name! Proud and self-confident was Saul as he rode towards Damascus. If he had been asked, he would have said not one who rode in company with him was worthy to touch the hem of his garment. But Saul was brought low—from the pinnacle of self into the dust before God. That bright light—those

sad, reproachful words—those plain commands. The proud heart was broken—the dark soul illuminated, and after those days of outward darkness, from the house of Cornelius goes forth, not the lofty self-confident Saul, but the loving, faithful Apostle St. Paul, to proclaim the name of Jesus with a voice which was to ring clear like a clarion in the courts of kings, and a heart which had learned of Him who was meek and lowly and given unto St. Paul, what He will give to every one of us who take His yoke upon us—*rest* unto our souls!”

Mrs. Crofton paused. Gilbert, who had been playing at first with the marker in his Bible, now was looking earnestly at her; Percy's eyes were on the floor.

“I like that,” said Gilbert; “let me come again, Aunt Amabel.”

“Yes, with pleasure, Gibbie. Now we must all get ready, for the carriage will be round in twenty minutes.”

It was a delightful drive along the straight road, which, with but few turns, led towards Colerich. The country was flat, but shrouded in its garment of snow, which lay on the tops of the furze bushes, and hung in light wreaths on the clumps of Scotch firs, which here and there diversified the way, it looked beautiful in the children's eyes. The spire of Colerich Cathedral came in sight at last, and then they went in by one of the old city gates, and drove under the Castle Hill to an hotel in rather a *narrow street* off the Market Place. The boys were *all eagerness* to get the skates—Amy longing to be

inside the cathedral. First, however, Uncle Hubert said they must order lunch; then while it was getting ready they could do the shopping, and afterwards go into the Close, to the organist's house, whom Colonel Crofton knew very well. There was a long list of things wanted given Mrs. Crofton by Aunt Julia, and she and Amy, and little Harry, undertook this, while the elder boys went with Colonel Crofton. It was past two o'clock when lunch was over.

"The nicest dinner I ever had!" Harry said; and Colonel Crofton laughed, and told him he knew what was good when he praised Eastshire turkey.

It was some distance to the Close, and Amy hung behind a little.

"Tired, my darling?"

"No, mamma, only rather stiff. I always am in cold weather, you know."

Such a bright smile accompanied the words, that Mrs. Crofton thought the pitying glance of an old lady who passed them in the narrow street, and had to turn off the pavement for Amy, thrown away. Percy was in high spirits, Gilbert amiable, and there had been no dispute between the two boys to spoil the pleasure of the day as yet. Dr. Brush was at home, "particularly engaged," the man said; but on his disappearing into an inner room with Colonel Crofton's card, Dr. Brush came out. The greeting was very warm, and then Mrs. Crofton was introduced, and Dr. Brush was called upon to remember how she used to come in from Rookwood for her music lessons in days long past.

"It is a pleasure, indeed," said Dr. Brush; "and

has the talent descended to this little lady, or these boys? I was just hearing our head boy sing one of the solos in the anthem for to-morrow; will you come in and listen?"

Amy's eyes kindled, and she was delighted when they all were asked to go with Dr. Brush into the organ-room. Here was a pale, delicate-looking boy; he had been having a sharp lecture on a defective turn and a badly-pronounced word, when Dr. Brush had been interrupted, and he hailed the visitors with great satisfaction in his secret soul.

"Now, Walters, once more; and take breath, and mind that *h* in the last *he*."

Walters thrilled out his part again; it was scientifically done, but lacked soul. Still, intonation and time and effect were perfect. Colonel Crofton admired, and then said—

"Dr. Brush, I want you to hear my little niece."

"Ah! does she sing? Is that the half-hour bell? I play this afternoon; but there is time. What shall it be?"

"If you play 'O rest in the Lord,'" said Mrs. Crofton, taking up the music which lay there, "she will sing it."

Dr. Brush looked doubtful, but struck the chords, and Amy began.

The organist's face, as she went on, told what he felt. As Amy sung, little faces of other choristers who were in another room leading from the organ-room, came clustering round the doorway, and Walters stood as if spell-bound.

“What a voice! Good heavens! Colonel Crofton, it would make the child’s fortune!” and turning to Mrs. Crofton, “tutored by no unworthy influence.”

Amy was pleased at the praise that followed, no doubt, but her attention was directed to a little boy, younger than Walters, who had deep blue eyes, and a sweet rosy mouth. Braving Dr. Brush’s wrath, and not heeding Walters’ signals, he came in, and went up to Amy.

“That’s my song; but you’ve put it into my head to sing it better than I ever did before. *Don’t* you love it?”

“Bennet, what are you doing?” asked Dr. Brush, sharply. “The child is our second boy,” turning to the others; “curiously enough, he is to sing this very thing in the church this afternoon.”

“Well, as we have to see the cathedral, and must be there a little before service, we wish you good-by, Dr. Brush.”

“Our first but not our last meeting, I trust,” said the organist to Amy; “for auld lang syne, we must be friends, young lady. Your mother has had many a lesson in this very room.”

Amy blushed and smiled, but she wondered whether Dr. Brush thought she heard the rather loud whisper,—“What brought on the lameness?” to Colonel Crofton, as they were going away.

The cathedral, in itself, was a delight indeed to Amy. She paced up the wide nave with wondering, grave surprise, and then passed within the choir-

door, and took her seat with her mother, while the boys went round with their uncle.

Amy sat quiet and thoughtful, trying to picture her mother there—a gay, glad child; that dear mother, who now knelt, her head buried in her hands, while memory was busy with the days that were past, and faith could rise to the place where the husband of her youth had gone—to that temple above, where “His servants shall serve Him.”

When the choristers and clergymen came in, Amy found her little friend was opposite to her. The organ sounded, and the service began. Little Bennet's voice was rich and full—so much nicer than Walters', Amy thought. Then came the anthem; and Bennet, when asked afterwards by the minor canon what made him sing so much better than he had ever done before, said—

“Oh! it was the lame young lady at Dr. Brush's, sir. She sang it first, and taught me; somehow, it seemed as if she had got the rest, and was waiting *patiently*. I told Walters that, and he said he didn't know—it was a good voice, but it wasn't tutored enough. We are too much *tutored*—that's it!” said little Bennet, giving his cap a toss before putting it on, and running off to catch a glance of the party from Rookwood before they disappeared through the archway of the Upper Close.

The short winter day was closing fast, and it was very cold, and the frost as sharp as ever, as the *Croftons* drove home. All the children were *inside with Mrs. Crofton*, Colonel Crofton taking the

back seat, where Percy rode with Gilbert in the morning. Harry was soon asleep. Amy gazed out on the bright frosty sky, where stars were beginning to peep out, and a slender crescent moon grew every moment bright and more shining.

"What a famous time we shall have to-morrow on the ice!" said Percy. "O no, not to-morrow; I forgot, it's Sunday."

"What of that?" said Gilbert, "we can skate all the same!"

Percy was silent; his mother was quiet, and made no remark.

"I say, Percy, you remember I am to have the skates with the two buckles on the top strap; they keep on so much better."

"All right, you'll get the best, no doubt; but anyhow we shall get plenty of falls the first time. Uncle Hubert says so."

"I shan't, it must be quite easy. Besides, I am to have Jenkins as well as papa."

"Some one to take care of us!" said Percy, scornfully. "You may keep Jenkins to yourself; I'd rather cut myself than be held up by a flunkey!"

"He's my servant, which makes a difference. You don't happen to have one!"

"No, and so much the better! Why, you can't take Jenkins to Eton with you; they would call you a baby!"

"I'm not going to Eton; I'm to have a private tutor. And you won't want a servant at the grammar school, of what's the name of the place where you live—*Bayley-bridge*, I should say!"



"You look after your own concerns, and don't meddle with mine!" said Percy.

"Dear me! what a stupid drive this is," said Gilbert. "Come, Amy, sing a song; after all old Brush's compliments, you ought to be ready."

Amy was tired, but she was anxious to stop further quarrelling between her brother and Gilbert, and so did as he wished.

"I can't do much for others," thought Amy, "so I must do what I can!"

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## CHAPTER VI.

### WINTER SPORTS.

THE question about skating was decided the next morning at breakfast by grandpapa saying, "Certainly not; we have lived too long out of England, and have forgotten our Sundays, amongst other things."

Old Mr. Crofton sighed, and Aunt Julia said—

"There is no harm in innocent amusement."

Gilbert pouted; but Percy's was a triumphant look, which seemed to vex Gilbert still more.

"What heathens they are!" his mother heard Percy say to Amy. "Aunt Julia is reading a novel, and it's my belief won't go to church!"

This was as they were all separating after breakfast to dress. Percy's mother was not happy about *him*; but still she said nothing, but waited till the *right* opportunity should come.

After church and before lunch, Percy and Harry were on the terrace. Neptune, the large Newfoundland dog, was Percy's great ally and friend. Percy found a ball of Harry's, and this was thrown for Nep to find, and great hallooing and hurraing, and "at it, Nep, at it," resounded. Mrs. Crofton was in her room, which looked over the terrace. She tapped at the window—"Too much noise, Percy."

Percy heeded for a moment, and then the shouts began again; and at last Harry rolled down the sloping bank at the end, and there were great shouts and laughter.

Mrs. Crofton was not surprised to hear the hall door open beneath, and grandpapa's voice—"Boys, there has been enough of this," and "Come in and get ready for dinner."

Percy burst into his mother's room soon after, looking very bright and exulting, while Harry's best little tunic was rent, and his Sunday cap considerably the worse for Nep's paws.

"Oh! Harry," said Amy, "what a pity!"

"It's been such fun," said Percy; "that's a splendid dog. *Did* you see him roll Harry down like another ball?"

Harry was a high spirit, but this had been rather too much, and he murmured, "I couldn't help it," as his mother looked gravely at the spoiled dress.

Hannah came as the first bell sounded to put the children to rights, and great were her lamentations. Harry had to put on his every-day dress, and his mother said—

"Percy, it was your fault. Oh! Percy!"

The sight of his mother's face touched him in a moment.

"I am so sorry, mamma; but the truth is, I had rather be at home; I *can't* be good *here*, and never shall!"

Poor Percy! like so many other boys and girls, putting the blame on the *circumstance* of the moment, and not on himself. No doubt Rookwood Manor had its trials for him—no doubt the boy nature was tried, and Gilbert was aggravating, but what of that? Where is the victory without a struggle? where is the rest which has not labour first? Percy's was a proud, impetuous nature, but he must curb it, and when it bursts forth and leads him into sin, he must not say, "Oh! it was *so* provoking. I could not help it."

We *can* all help it if we choose, but we must get our armour from a heavenly armoury, and we must go, and with *His* weapons and in *His* strength, who is the great Captain of every boy and girl and little child, as well as every man and woman in the world's wide battle-field.

To all outward seeming for the rest of that Sunday, Percy was all right; he saw his mother was disturbed, and for her sake he tried to let Gilbert contradict him without answering, and repressed an inclination to laugh when his cousin said he must have another pair of gloves with velvet cuffs. A *boy* with such gloves was to Percy's mind too absurd. But the Sunday evening was pleasant. The whole family gathered round the drawing-room fire, and Uncle Hubert and Aunt Julia, and even grand-

papa, told stories of their travels. Aunt Julia's were of Spain and Italy, of music and painting, and golden harvests, and sunny mountains touched with a rosy light; of orange groves and vineyards, and of the graceful Spanish ladies, with their dark eyes and black mantillas, and the throngs of these which congregate to watch the fearful struggles of a bull-fight in the arenas of Cadiz or Madrid. Then grandpapa told of their journeys themselves; of the wretched little posadas, as inns are called in Spain; of the tumbles of horses that would not go, and of drivers who cared nothing about it; of bad food and cookery, upsetting all ideas of English comfort.

But Uncle Hubert's stories were the best, the children thought, for he could tell of the armed hosts of Russia; of the long weary months before Sebastopol was taken; of the cold and misery of the trenches; of the reaction which was so *hard* to bear; of the hospitals and their crowded wards; and of Florence Nightingale, and many another, who were as ministering spirits among the sick and dying! Amy listened with rapt attention.

"You have seen her, Uncle Hubert?"

"Yes, Amy, many a time. I was laid up myself with an ugly shot here," lifting his long light beard and showing a deep hole in his neck. "Many a fair hand has touched that, and I owe a great deal to them, I can tell you. Once I remember hearing one of the sisters at Scutari talking to a poor youth on a bed not far off—the other wards were more than full, and he was brought into the officers'. It was the middle of the night, and all was quiet. The

boy was dictating a letter home to England, to the home he would never see again. He was a brave fellow, and had borne a dreadful operation with scarcely a groan—but this letter to his mother he could hardly get out for tears and sobs. I gathered from it that he enlisted for a soldier without her leave, and ‘if I could only know she forgave me,’ was his cry. The lady comforted him, and I fancy I can hear her voice—very low and pleasant it was—saying to the poor fellow, when the letter was done, the story of the Prodigal Son; It seemed to soothe him wonderfully, and he went wandering off, saying—‘Father, I have sinned! Mother, I have sinned!’ and talked about the house at home—of the red roses which grew up it—of the church bells, and walking through the fields on Sunday mornings with his sisters—and then he seemed to see them all, for he called them by their names. He was dead the next morning.”

Colonel Crofton gave a great stretch, and got up suddenly.

“It is curious how these things pass out of one’s thoughts in everyday life,” he said; “and yet, telling you about it, children, brings the whole scene back to me. Come, little Amy, let us have one of your songs now.”

“Oh! Uncle Hubert, tell some more, *do pray*. I wish I could be like Florence Nightingale.”

“I wish I were a soldier I know,” said Percy. “Fancy what that charge was, Uncle Hubert; don’t *you dream of it* sometimes, that grand Balaklava *rush?*”

"No, Percy, I'm not romantic, but I'm glad I was in it. Now, then, for singing; wake up, Gibbie, boy!"

But Gilbert and his mother were only roused by Amy's voice, as at last it made the room resound with a sweet chant-like singing of Keble's evening hymn, of which, said or sung, none can ever weary.

The next morning skating began in good earnest, but even Percy was surprised to find how difficult it was. There was quite a party on the ice. Mr. Foster came, with two or three of the best lads from the school in the village. Then there was Mark Farrant, the son of the gardener who lived at the Lodge; and there were the men servants, on the plea of taking care of the young gentlemen, but really for the sake of getting a sly slide themselves. Then the maids came to look on, and the two Mrs. Crofton, and Amy, of course, though she was not allowed to stand long. Gilbert found Jenkins very useful to pick him up, and Percy did not disdain Uncle Hubert's occasional help. Altogether skating, like everything else, is not to be learned in a day. I daresay most boys who read this know how exciting it is, and how pleasant in the ear is the rough scraping noise as the skates cut into the ice. Colour began to come into Gilbert's pale cheeks, and Amy thought she had never seen him look so animated before. It was curious to notice how Gilbert claimed service of everyone, calling out to Mark Farrant to move off that slide, and to keep the other boys at the narrow end of the little piece of water. A thought of whether *they* liked it or not never seemed to enter his head.

"Now then," said Gilbert, as Jenkins took off his skates for him, "I am going down that slide; tell those poor boys to leave off."

"Take turns with them," said Percy; "why not?"

But Gilbert gave a young one, not much bigger than Harry, a push, which sent the little fellow down on his face, and his nose began to bleed.

"What a shame!" said Percy.

But Mark picked up little Bobbie, who was his brother, and wiped his face, telling him it was not much, and not to be frightened. But the little boy looked ruefully at the red streak on his hand, and was obliged to be led home to his mother by Mark.

"You might have said you were sorry, I think," said Percy. "Come now, Gilbert, you'll have Harry down next."

Gilbert answered with a contemptuous "Take care of yourself and leave me."

The words were scarcely uttered when Gilbert overbalanced himself and fell with some force. His mother screamed, and his father stopped in the middle of cutting eights and other figures with Mr. Foster for the amusement of the boys, to come to Gilbert's assistance.

Gilbert had given himself a good shake, but that was all. Still the suppressed laughter of the village boys and of Mark Farrant, and Percy's peal of merriment, were too much. He looked very angry, and went home with his mother, saying, in an undertone—"You are very ill-mannered, Percy, and, I expect, wish I had broken my leg."

"No, I don't; but as you are not much hurt I would not look so scared, if I were you."

Percy came in that afternoon from a ride on Diamond with Uncle Hubert. Hannah met him as he was running off to find Amy for a game of bagatelle, saying his mamma wanted him. He went up to her room rather slowly, feeling that his mother's glance had been sad and grave the last day or two, and conscience told him he was the cause.

"Where's Amy, mamma, and Harry?"

"Amy is with her grandpapa, Harry with Hannah; but, Percy, I want you alone. Take off your coat, and come and warm yourself by the fire. Percy, shall I tell you a story?"

"Yes, mamma; but wont the others like to hear it too? But never mind; perhaps, if I called Amy, Gilbert would be coming too to spoil it. We don't want him."

"Yes, I do, and have sent a message for him."

"Mamma! you never like Gilbert?"

"Yes, Percy; pity for him is so strong that it is growing into love."

"Mamma! I can't believe it."

"We will say no more about it, Percy; but ask yourself, since you came here, if you have done one single thing to win Gilbert, to set him a good example, to do him good in any way. No, Percy"—and he was silent—"Gilbert, on looking back on this visit of yours to Rookwood, will have no cause to love you, as you know very well."

"But a silly, spoiled, selfish——"



"Stop, Percy. May he not say—'But a proud, conceited, self-confident——'"

"Oh, mamma!"

Gilbert now came in.

"What do you want, Aunt Amabel?"

"You, if you like to stay," she said, with a smile.

"Well, it looks cosy enough; the fire is bright, and here's a nice chair. But what are we to do?"

"I thought of a story this morning. I wished to tell you and Percy, and will begin, if you like, at once."

Gilbert tucked himself into the easy chair, and Percy sat by the table, drawing with a pencil on a drawing-book he had left there in the morning.

"Come nearer the fire, Percy dear."

"No, thank you, I'm hot with riding."

Then his mother began:—

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## CHAPTER VII.

### THE TWO BROTHERS.

"I KNEW two boys once who lived in a large country house, with pleasant shrubberies and plantations around it, and green paths and glades in these, where pheasants would rise from the underwood with a loud whirring noise, and hares and rabbits, with their white tails set up, would run *across the paths*, and squirrels, with bright piercing *eyes and little knowing sharp noses*, would sit and

swing on the branches of the Scotch fir-trees, and scamper over and away into the thick of the wood when a footstep started them, or Hubert's merry laugh was heard, or Ralph's pleasant voice.

"These brothers were nearly of an age—Ralph, the youngest, pale and delicate always; Hubert, strong, and big, and tall. These boys were always together, in play and work. Ralph took the lead indoors, for he was clever, and lessons were no trouble to him; while out of doors, Hubert was the best jumper, and cricket-player, and rider; and Ralph always followed where Hubert led. It was beautiful to see how the stronger took care of the weaker, and how Hubert always thought of Ralph's safety before his own.

"I knew these boys very well, and I don't think I ever heard them quarrel. Sometimes there might be an impatient word from Hubert; sometimes a quick retort from Ralph; but as to a quarrel, it was unknown.

"One day I was walking with them, and we met a party of gentlemen and ladies on horseback, just outside the grounds. One of the ladies dropped her whip, and away went Ralph to pick it up; it had fallen between her horse and that of her companion, and both were frisky, and curveted about very much, so that it seemed as if Ralph could not get the whip.

"Hubert had been behind in the plantation, and had not come out into the road yet. When he did, and saw his brother's position, the young ladies' horses whisking about, he gave a great 'Hallo!

come back, Ralph,' and then, laying his firm boy's hand on the bridle of one of the horses, he held it while Ralph picked up the whip and restored it. A gentleman came riding back at this moment, and joined his thanks to that of the two girls; he had been so absorbed in conversation with the gentleman who was his companion that the stoppage of the young ladies had not been observed, and it was Hubert's 'Hallo!' that made him look back.

"'Thank you, my boy,' he said; 'you are a fine fellow. What is your name?'

"Hubert told.

"'Hum! heir to all this fine property, then?'

"'But, papa, you ought to thank the little boy too,' said one of the girls; 'I am sure I do. He was so quick to run across the road for my unlucky whip.'

"'Ah! yes; you are much younger than your brother, eh?'

"'Only a year,' said Ralph.

"'Why, he looks three or four years older, poor little fellow! Have you bad health? Your brother would make two of you, any day.'

"'Every boy knows it is pleasant to be complimented on his size, and strength, and manliness; but Hubert answered, with a good-tempered laugh—

"'No; Ralph makes two of me, sir, in most things. He has all the brains—he is three times as clever as I am.'

"'I remember the gentleman's look as he said, 'Well done, my boy,' and the bright smile which accompanied the words, 'that's how it should be; isn't it, Kate?' And then, with more smiles and

thanks, they cantered off after the two gentlemen, who were at the turn of the road, wondering what it was all about.

“These boys went to Eton together, and there it was the same. I have heard that once there a boy taunted Ralph with being slender, and short, and delicate, like a *girl*, and also referred in public, with a scoff, to a slight stoop he had, and that Hubert knocked him down. Ralph was so sorry, and begged Hubert to let the fellows say what they would, only never to get into a passion for him again. Not many days after, the boy who was the offender revenged himself on Hubert in a cowardly way, by tripping up Ralph with a bit of twine as he went into chapel one morning, and he fell against the corner of a seat and cut his forehead. Hubert said nothing; but Ralph saw how angry he was. Then he begged his brother to let it rest, and to forgive as he would be forgiven; but Hubert said—

“‘If he had thrown *me* down I could have stood it, but *you*, so much smaller and weaker!’

“So, when all the boys of his form were collected, Hubert clenched the offender by the collar, and held him with a grip from which he could not get away, while he called for attention, and told how ‘this was a *coward* who would not fight, and who had sneered at his brother, and been knocked down for it.’ There were cheers then, and cries of ‘All right!’ and Hubert was going on to say more and tell of the last act, when his brother came up and laid his hand upon his mouth. The disgrace of having such a mean trick told of an Eton boy would, Ralph

knew, be never forgotten, so Ralph said, 'Hush, Hubert; let us all shake hands, it's all right now. Come, Bryant,' to the boy who stood trembling under Hubert's grasp. Bryant was thoroughly ashamed, and held out his hand, while the other boys cheered Ralph even more than Hubert, and the two brothers were more popular than before."

"Now, you see," said Mrs. Crofton, "how it was. Hubert's protection and Ralph's good influence; it was a beautiful union, and it was only broken by death. Percy and Gilbert, you see why I have told you this, and I could tell, you much more like it of father and uncle. Shall it be said that you two boys, the sons of these brothers, should have bitter envying and strife in your hearts?"

"No, mamma," said Percy, boldly. "I have been very disagreeable to you, Gilbert, but I'll try to be—to be——"

Percy broke down, and stood leaning against his mother's chair.

Gilbert meanwhile had sat gazing into his aunt's face, and the dawning of light within gave his pale blue eyes a sort of wistful expression new to them.

"Aunt Amabel, I like to hear you talk. I am so glad you came. I daresay it's better and pleasanter to be good, only I never shall."

"Don't say that, Gibbie; say, '*I will*, God being my helper.' Let me see you and Percy friends; both have been wrong, both are sorry."

*The two boys shook hands, Percy advancing to Gilbert.*

Then Amy came in, saying in her clear, bird-like voice—

“I’ve been talking to grandpapa about New Year’s Day. There’s to be a children’s party, and a dinner for the elders first. That’s the way, grandpapa says, it was in country neighbourhoods in old times. Grandpapa is so nice to talk to; and, mamma, I have been singing to him; and Aunt Julia is so kind, teaching me new songs. But, everybody is kind to me.”

Happy Amy! Her sweet, child-like soul rejoiced in *good* and *truth*. The bodily infirmity had chastened and refined the mind, and, as she said, every one was kind.

“My sweet, loving, gentle child!” her mother thought. “Who could help it?”

Several days went on. The same hard frost continued, and skating and outdoor amusements on the ice were pursued with great zeal. On Wednesday more snow fell, and signs of a thaw began to appear. The boys went to the ice on Wednesday morning, but Colonel Crofton made a careful examination first, and some parts towards the middle were not thought safe.

“It will freeze again at night,” Percy said; but Jenkins shook his head, and the gardener said “there was a break-up.” So that afternoon the boys spent at the Vicarage.

Mr. Foster was a very pleasant man, and had so many things to show, and so much to tell to interest them. He was busy about the school, teaching the boys to do something to wile away the winter even-

ings, carving after a rough sort, and drawing where he saw any sign of talent.

"The girls I must talk to your mother about," he said to Percy. "I wish I had her always at hand at Rookwood."

"Amy is going to sing on New Year's night," said little Harry; "to-morrow, mamma is going with grandpapa and Aunt Julia to pay a distant visit; and Uncle Hubert has to go to Colerich. May we come here again, Mr. Foster? and Amy perhaps could go to the school—oh! I forget it's holiday-time—and teach them a hymn or something, I was going to say."

"A bright thought, little man. Yes; you shall all come and dine with me at one o'clock, if you get leave. There'll be no skating to-morrow, if this thaw goes on, and so I shall expect you at eleven, and we will go a round and beat up the girls with ears and voices, and get a class. It's the very thing."

That evening the plan was discussed of the children spending the morning at the Vicarage, and highly approved.

"It will keep you out of mischief, and you'll be in safer hands than Brooks' or old Hannah's," said Colonel Crofton.

"We must leave an order, though, of '*no ice to-morrow!*'"

"Oh! yes," said Aunt Julia; "unless Gilbert promises, he must go with us."

"*That I shan't*, mamma; a nasty stupid call, on *old Lady Baker*, I daresay!"

"Well, indeed," said his mother, "I shall be very uneasy, wont you, Amabel?" turning to Mrs. Crofton.

"If the ice is dangerous, and Hubert says so, the children's promise not to go on it will suffice me; neither Percy nor Harry would break their word."

"No, no," said Harry, "not for the world; but we haven't promised yet, mamma."

"No," said his grandfather, laughing; "and Jack Frost may yet serve your turn."

"The wind was getting round again to the north-east," Jenkins said. Percy was sure it would freeze; and Mark Farrant was going to make a snow-house and put a candle inside. Mark was very weather-wise, and they had met him when they came home from the Vicarage. When Percy went to bed, however, the dull, hazy look of the sky, and the sickly moon, which was now and then seen through a veil of grey clouds, looked as if Mark Farrant might be wrong for once.



## CHAPTER VIII.

## A DAY AT THE VICARAGE, AND ITS END.

"WE must have the promise about the ice," was Uncle Hubert's remark at breakfast. "It is not safe. I have been down with Jenkins, and, though not absolutely cracked, we can hear that it is giving. If I am at home, I might venture on the narrow part; but I don't know. Anyhow, children, it must be an understood thing that not one of you goes on the ice."

"What a bore!" said Gilbert; and Percy was no less disappointed.

Colonel Crofton's horse came round early, and he was off for Colerich. The carriage party were not to leave till eleven, when the children were to go down to the Vicarage. Aunt Julia was seldom at breakfast, and directly after the four children gathered in Mrs. Crofton's room. There was time for the Bible lesson again, and for a page or two of French, but that was all. Gilbert was fidgetty and not very attentive, Percy almost less so.

"Now, my children," said Mrs. Crofton, "let me have your promise about the ice, and I shall go with an easy mind?"

Amy said, "Oh! mamma, dear, they will not think of going." Percy and Harry both said, "You *may trust us, mamma;*" though Percy added, "*it's horridly provoking.*"

Gilbert had been sent for to his mother's room, who, trying every means to persuade him to go with her, and bribing him to comply with every temptation possible, found it quite useless, and regretted in her secret soul that Gilbert was so unmanageable. Then she went off at last, wondering at her sister-in-law's cheerful face, and smiling good-by to the four children as they stood on the steps to watch the carriage drive away.

"Now, then, for the Vicarage," said Percy; "I expect that will be great fun."

Brooks, at her mistress's order, walked with the children to see them safely under Mr. Foster's wing. They passed the pond on their way; there were several ominous-looking cracks; but Mark Farrant was on the ice, building a grand snow castle.

"Why, Mark, we didn't think you'd be here."

"Nor I didn't think you'd be coming. I wanted to surprise you in the dark with this 'ere erection," said Mark, with a broad grin.

"Oh! Mark, what fun it must be to make it! I wish you hadn't begun it on the ice, because we mustn't come," said Percy.

Gilbert was just beginning to say, "We might go and look what he's doing; that isn't sliding or skating, and what's safe for him is for us," when Amy called them to come on, for Mr. Foster was advancing over the heath to meet them.

Brooks, whose young master did not deign to notice her, now left the children; and, as Percy predicted, they had great fun with Mr. Foster. He made Amy take his arm, holding it low, as he had

seen her uncle do; and the support was so strong and firm that Amy got along famously. They took several cottages on their way to the Vicarage, old Giles's amongst the number, who welcomed Amy with delight, and she gave him a song, as she had promised him; then they visited a certain Mrs. Williams, who had two little girls, Sarah and Emma, both of whom said they'd like to learn to sing, or I should say their mother spoke for them; then Mr. Foster asked all to come up to the Vicarage that afternoon, and Mrs. Green, his housekeeper, would send up some tea and bread-and-butter, and perhaps a bun. There were a great many things to see and admire at the Vicarage; there were two rough terriers, Bounce and Dandy, and with them Harry made great friends. Then, in the stable, was Mr. Foster's horse, Zoe—a beautiful black creature, with a white star on her forehead. They visited her in her stall, and fed her with two or three lumps of sugar and some bread. Mrs. Green came out to welcome the little people, and to show off the merits of her brood of speckled chickens, and her fat ducks, and a pair of young turkeys.

Mr. Foster left the Croftons to amuse themselves till dinner, and seeing Amy look tired, he made her happy in a snug corner of the little parlour, and gave her a story-book to read, which had just come from Colerich, in a box he had for the village-lending library once a quarter. The boys were not inclined to come in, and kept out of *the way*, and, Amy anxiously hoped, out of mischief, till half-past one brought them all in to dinner. It

was such a pleasant, cosy dinner,—roast beef and mince pies, and what Mrs. Green called a bachelor's plum pudding.

"Why don't you use that big room, where the shutters are half-shut?" asked Gilbert, presently.

"Oh! so you have been there, have you? and what did you see?"

"Nothing but heaps and heaps of books," said Harry; "and we could scarcely see them."

"Why don't you use it?" asked Gilbert, again.

"Because I don't want it. Two rooms are enough for the master of this pudding, I'm sure, Percy."

"Well, you've a great many nice things; but Zoe is the best."

"Yes; Zoe is the best, but she and I are going to part."

"Mr. Foster, what do you mean?"

"I mean, Zoe is too expensive and dainty a lady for a poor parson's house, and she is going next week."

Mr. Foster gave a sigh, and a shade came over his face.

"Well, I think it's a shame to sell a horse like that," said Gilbert.

"Gently, my good sir. I did not say she was sold; she is going to my old home and hers, far away in the sunny south, that is, twenty miles below Plymouth."

"Oh! have you a home there?" asked Amy.

"Yes; a very dear and pleasant home, amidst hills, and dales, and winding rivers; not one endless heath, or turnip-field, like this good Eastshire."

“What made you come here, Mr. Foster?”

“Your grandfather gave me the living, and made me Vicar of Rookwood.”

“But it must be a very poor place after yours, where Zoe is going to?”

“Yes; it's not so grand, but, you know, I like it, and Zoe doesn't, though I have not heard her say so, but I fancy she gives a scornful neigh, as we come to one turnip-field after another, in our rides together.”

“Well, I'd keep her, I know,” said Gilbert. “What is the use of money, if it isn't to get nice things?”

Percy and Amy both knew better than that, but were silent; it was little Harry said—

“Why, Gilbert, mamma always says, that ‘doing good with even a penny, is better than wasting it on ourselves.’”

Gilbert did not relish Harry's addressing him in a sort of instructive tone, and replied—

“Ah! you like a pennyworth of lollypop, I dare say, so don't pretend. But Mr. Foster, after dinner, you said we might see your microscope.”

So they did; and then the children came, and an hour's singing followed, and there was tea in Mrs. Green's room at four o'clock, and a famous plum cake, “light as a feather,” as Mrs. Green truly said, when Harry took his third piece, and “it could not hurt an infant.”

The five or six little girls from the village, who *had come to hear Miss Amy Crofton's singing, and had been trying to sing with her, sat at a side-*

table, and did ample justice to the cake. Sooner than any of the children wished, the announcement was brought that Mrs. Brooks and Hannah were come for the Master Croftons, and the "good-by" to the Vicarage had to be said, and the children set off home. Amy was tired, and walked slowly with Hannah; Brooks kept up with Master Crofton, and they were some way before the rest. The moon was nearly full, and there was plenty of light from it, and the snow together.

The pond when reached was greeted with a great shout of surprise and pleasure. Mark Farrant's castle was really grand. He had got five or six dips from the village shop, and when the footsteps were heard, and the figures of Percy and Gilbert seen advancing, Mark had lit his candles. He had taken a great deal of trouble, and on the edge of the pond were his own little brothers, and most of the boys who had received permission to skate and slide there for the last few days. Gilbert and Percy were far in advance of little Harry and Amy. When they saw the snow-house they rushed on, Percy stopping in time, and remembering his promise, as he neared the pond; but alas for Gilbert!

"Hallo! Mark, however have you managed that?" and he was on the ice by Mark's side in a moment.

"Stop, Gilbert, stop, you were not to go; *we* were told not!"

"Master Crofton," said Mark, "the ice is creaky here, you'd better not; it's double weight, sir, you'd *better not*;" but Gilbert would not listen, he stooped

to look in at the door of the snow-house, and to see how Mark had managed to fix the candles within it, when there was a sudden and rather loud crack.

“Be off, sir, for Heaven’s sake.”

“Gilbert! Gilbert!” shouted Percy. Gilbert was frightened, and in his haste to get back slipped, fell heavily, and made a large hole in the ice, into which first one leg and then another got, while he clutched frantically at the edges to save himself.

“Don’t struggle, Master Crofton, and I’ll save you; don’t struggle; give me your hand.”

But Gilbert had no self-command. Just as Percy reached him, the thin platform of ice on which he and Mark stood gave way with a hoarse grinding sound, then there was a splashing and gurgling noise, with a loud terrified scream from poor Gilbert, and all three boys were in the water. The lookers-on gave the alarm, and shrieks and cries brought help from the stables near, just as Amy and Hannah came up. Percy had his hand on a strong ledge of ice. Mark bravely tried to hold him and Gilbert up. In vain Mark besought Gilbert not to struggle; the poor child had no presence of mind, and the ice kept cracking and giving way, as Mark and Percy, with Gilbert clinging to them, held on, first on one side and then on the other, and every moment the danger grew greater. The men who had come from the stable called out to Mark as to which side was the strongest, and would bear best—“Don’t all of you come on, or we shall go down, and you with us.”

Mark said, “A rope on this right side, and all of you hold on to it, and drag me out.”

Mark's thought was for others,—Gilbert and Percy. Gilbert's shrieks and cries were the worst part; and Percy's "Hush, Gilbert, pray don't," were useless.

The boy himself was held by Mark's one stout arm, but Gilbert clung on the other side with such desperate energy, that Percy's shoulder felt almost broken.

To the lookers-on, the minutes before the groom had gone to the stables and returned with a rope seemed hours. Amy buried her face in her hands, and "Oh! God, save them!" burst from her white trembling lips. Harry stood motionless and horror-struck, while Brooks and Hannah lamented aloud, and Hannah tried to call out cheeringly, "Master Percy, my dear, hold fast. They are coming now."

Yes, they were coming; and very cautiously did one of the men crawl hands and knees, the end of the rope in his hand, within reach of Mark.

"Not too near, not too near," Mark said. "'Tis all giving, like paper."

Suddenly Gilbert's cries for help ceased.

"Oh! Mark," said Percy, "he's leaving hold. Oh! Mark!"

One moment more, and Mark had slipped the noose round Gilbert's arm, though he was up to the neck in water and senseless. Percy had the rope passed round his body next, and Mark held it tight.

"I don't see now how we are to get on," he said; "if I leave go with this hand, their weight will drag me after 'em."



"It's firm here," said a voice, hollow and changed; but it was Uncle Hubert's.

In the dim moonlight the bystanders could see his face, which was white and ghastly as the ice he stood on.

"Tom, another rope."

It was a moment of suspense, but at last the two little boys were laid on the firmer platform of ice, and Mark had floundered out towards the other bank, and they were all saved.

Then Colonel Crofton raised Gilbert in his arms, and Jenkins, Percy; and so, the rest following, they went up the drive towards the house, and were just on the door-step as the carriage drove up. The rest was like a dream,—Aunt Julia's scream; Mrs. Clifton's "Oh! Percy!"

"He is safe, mamma; he is safe," said Amy.

But Percy's effort to assure his mother failed. He was laid by Gilbert's side in the library, senseless too; the exposure to cold and the pain in his shoulder together, changing the "All right, mamma," which he tried to get out, into an inarticulate murmur, as his mother bent over him, with a deep sigh, and "Percy, Percy—did he break his word to me—Oh! did he go on the ice?"

Brandy and other stimulants soon revived Percy; but Gilbert only opened his eyes once, to fall into another swoon, and he was carried to bed to wait the arrival of the doctor sent for to Morley, and there was more than one heart doubting if the heir of *Rookwood Manor* would ever speak again.

Percy's mother never forgot the kindness of Uncle Hubert, in the midst of his own great trouble, with his wife helpless in her wild uncontrolled grief; his father, venting *his* feeling in scolding every servant by turns for want of care, for a set of ignorant mules, and so on; for Colonel Crofton came to the door as Percy was having the hot bath prepared, to say—

“There was no fault in Percy; he ran on to the ice to try and save Gilbert. Take heart, Amabel, he is a fine fellow!”

Percy heard the words, and when his mother bent over him, said—

“Oh! mamma, kiss me; I would rather have died than broken my promise to you. I think I would, indeed, though it was dreadful hanging there just now. How is Gilbert?”

## CHAPTER IX.

## SICKNESS AT ROOKWOOD.

"How is Gilbert?" For many days that question was asked continually at Rookwood Manor. Percy was well again in a day or two; except for the strain of his shoulder, no ill effects were left of his adventure on the ice; but, Gilbert being delicate, caught a violent cold, and his pulse ran very high, and for a week or more his life hung on a thread. There was no New Year's party, no rejoicing friends; that night people went about softly in Rookwood Manor, and Aunt Amabel spent her time by the side of Gilbert's bed, trying to comfort his mother, who could scarcely bear the sight of her child in his delirium, and sometimes going softly to the library to say a word of hope to Mr. Crofton or Uncle Hubert, and then to return to her own children for a few minutes, before taking her post as head nurse for the night.

Percy was nearly well, but he sat very still by the fire, and Amy's effort to arouse him by reading quite failed. He looked restless and anxious; his arm in a sling, and all his eager, impetuous motion ceasing for the time. Mrs. Crofton saw how it was, and said—

"Amy, darling, go down to grandpapa a little while, and take Harry with you."

*As soon as the door shut, Percy said—*

"That's what I wanted, to be alone with you. Oh! mamma, Hannah said just now Gilbert would die! What shall I do?"

"He is very ill, Percy—very ill; but Dr. Evans, who came from Colerich, says there is hope, so take heart, Percy."

"I don't know, mamma, how it is," said Percy, fighting against his tears, "but I feel, if Gilbert died, I should always be wretched. It would not be so bad if I had loved him, or even liked him; till the last two days I have hated him, and it's so dreadful!"

His mother put her arm round Percy, and stroked his thick curls back from his forehead.

"Percy, I can believe it's a very hard lesson, I can, indeed; but let it bring forth fruit, and be careful in future about any sort of bitterness springing up in your heart!"

"Oh! what I felt as we hung there, mamma, the ice slipping away; and I thought if we went down nothing could save us, and I just saw, as if it had been written out, all my horrid feelings towards Gilbert—how I had despised and hated him, and set myself up, and I wondered if God could forgive me; and then I asked Him, mamma, and found myself saying the first prayer you taught us—the one Harry says now—'Make me full of love and gentleness, as Jesus was on earth,' and then I felt happier! But, mamma, when Gilbert's grasp on my shoulder gave way, and I thought he was sinking!—I shall never forget it. He had made such a noise, poor fellow, land when that stillness came, it

was like death!" Percy shuddered, saying, "I am a coward when I think of it!"

"Do not dwell on it, dear Percy," said his mother, "but on His great mercy who spared you to me!"

"Darling mother!" and Percy fairly gave way, and cried like a little child. "Will he get well, mamma?"

"We must ask God, Percy. I hope, myself, he will."

"There's another thing I must say, mamma, though you will never like me so well again: it is that I was pleased when Mrs. Bond used to say how I was much more fit to be the heir than Gilbert; and I was pleased when she and the servants flattered me; and oh! mamma, I *had* even thought, 'Suppose Gilbert did not live, as they all said he wouldn't, and then I *should* be the heir.' I am so *ashamed*, mamma, I can scarcely tell even you. If Gilbert dies, I shall never be happy!"

His mother comforted him with other wise and tender words, and told him the bitterest pang in losing our friends is the thought of harshness, or unkindness, or want of love shown towards them when they were here.

I don't wish to make any young heart sad that may read this story, but I would have every boy and girl remember how soon death *may* separate them from father or mother, brothers or sisters, *playfellows* or friends; and, oh! dear children, *every unkind word*, or even unkind thought, is a *bitter memory*, when those we love are beyond the

reach of hearing of our repentance, or hearing us say how dearly we love them! Let this thought be with us more than it is in every-day life; and let it make us watchful over words and actions, and I think the angry push to a little brother or sister, the cross, disrespectful word to father or mother, the *thought* even of dislike and hatred of those who have perhaps done something very trying and disagreeable, will be more often checked, and we shall pray to have a watch set over the door of our lips, that we sin not against our dear ones with an unruly tongue!

The whole week was, as I have told you, a very anxious one. Gilbert was not thought out of danger for ten days, and they were the longest Percy Crofton had ever spent. He hung about listless and dispirited; his right arm being sprained, made drawing impossible; and when he tried to read, his thoughts went wandering off to the scene on the ice and to Gilbert; and at night he would start up, fancying Gilbert was clinging to him, and crying out for help. He went to his grandpapa sometimes, but all his kindness and his poor sorrow-stricken Uncle Hubert's, too, was only an added weight to his heart! The housekeeper's room was distasteful, for Mrs. Bond began to sing the praises of his heroism in running to Gilbert, and saying how well he had always behaved, and flattery of any sort Percy had no ear for now. Once he tapped at the door of his Aunt Julia's sitting-room, but that was the worst trial of all! It was one of Gilbert's worst *days; his delirium had been very sad—cries and*

entreaties to be saved had resounded through that part of the house, and Aunt Amabel alone could stay with Brooks and Hannah and preserve her calmness.

Percy went up to the sofa where his aunt was lying, and feeling shy and awkward, could only get out, "I am sorry Gilbert is no better."

Aunt Julia was, as you may have discovered, neither wise in training her own child, nor kind to those of other people.

"I really can't bear to see you, Percy," was her answer. "You have been so cruel to my darling boy! I must beg you to leave me!"

Percy's heart beat with mingled sorrow, indignation, and remorse, and he left the room without another word.

But Gilbert's fever lessened, and at last left him, weak and helpless, but still in a fair way of recovery.

Mr. Foster, who had been at the Manor every day, and sometimes all night, was the first to tell Percy the good news that Dr. Evans had just left, saying, "all danger was over, and Gilbert would get well."

Mr. Foster had read more of Percy's thoughts than he at all supposed; so when he laid his hand on his shoulder, as he sat by firelight in the library, Amy by his side, one afternoon, he was surprised at the earnestness with which Mr. Foster said—

"Percy, my boy, thank God that it is all well *with your cousin*, we hope, and take courage about *the future.*"

Gilbert could not bear his Aunt Amabel out of his sight. He liked no one to give him anything but her; and her arrangement of the pillows was the only one that was ever comfortable. Poor Gilbert! it was a weary and irritable convalescence, and many a time Mrs. Crofton was nearly worn out. But Gilbert had been never taught to think for others when he was well; it was not likely he should begin to do so now.

The first meeting of the cousins was trying to both. Percy dreaded it, and Gilbert seemed to shrink from it too. But Percy was not prepared for the sight of his cousin, as he lay perfectly colourless in bed, his hair cut close round his head, and his pale blue eyes, large and wandering in their expression, with dark, almost black, lines round them. Percy took the little thin, almost transparent hand, and then kissed Gilbert's forehead. His mother drew back and left the boys a moment.

"Gilbert, dear old fellow, I am so glad you are better!"

"Are you, Percy?"

"Oh! I am, indeed! I've been so miserable, Gilbert!"

The tears were gathering in Percy's eyes. Gilbert looked amazed, then he said—

"We'll be friends now, shan't we?"

"As long as I live!" said Percy; "and we'll be like those brothers mamma told us about!" and Percy, able to bear no more, rushed past his mother out of the room.



## CHAPTER X.

## GILBERT LEARNS HIS LESSON.

GILBERT'S mother was very poorly for some time. The shock and anxiety had been too much for her, so the intercourse with his aunt and cousins was closer than ever. Many an afternoon, as the shadows from the fitful firelight danced and lengthened on the walls, they all sat together in Mrs. Crofton's room, or the library, where Gilbert was carried every day for a few hours as he got better. Here Amy would sing to him, holding one of his hands in hers, and his Aunt Amy would tell stories, and his father and grandfather would come in, and his mother too, as she was able, and they would have a cup of tea together, and be very cosy indeed.

Percy was always first to do anything for Gilbert, and his mother watched *him* anxiously, for she knew the *test* and *trial* of the reality of Percy's sorrow for the past was at hand. You must not expect to hear that all at once these boys slid into the most perfect harmony. Percy had to bite his lips sometimes to keep back an impatient expression, as Gilbert was hard to please, or ungrateful when all was done that could be. Poor boy! he was a long time in gaining strength, and was weak and fretful, and could not sleep or rest, long after stronger and more hardy boys would have shaken off the *effects of an illness* such as he had had.

*Colonel Crofton* was very anxious he should see

Mark Farrant, whose presence of mind had, humanly speaking, saved both the cousins. A handsome Bible and Prayer Book were to be bought for Gilbert to give Mark, with his name written in, and the date. Mrs. Crofton was to add a complete set of drawing materials in a good strong box, and grandpapa was to put inside that a thin bit of paper, which had a large *J F V E* printed in one corner, and which was to convey to Mark's wondering eyes the fact that he had five pounds in the world—solely and absolutely his own!

The children went to Colerich in the carriage to choose the books, and Uncle Hubert was glad they should have the change. They started early one morning, while the January day was yet young, and the sun scarcely free of the bank of mist out of which it was struggling over the moor.

"Uncle Hubert," said Amy, "we must hear morning service at Colerich Cathedral, and pay good Dr. Brush another visit."

Grandpapa went too, and Gilbert was left under the care of his mother and aunt. The former could not leave her room, and Gilbert spent the morning on the sofa there. About one o'clock Jenkins carried him into the library, and he was comfortably settled on the sofa, and there was his dinner all ready, with Aunt Amabel to eat it with him. She saw he missed his cousins, and exerted herself to be more than usually cheerful; and Gilbert ate his roast chicken and drank his wine and water with more zest than usual. After dinner Aunt Amabel said—

"Gibbie, shall we take a turn up and down the room?"

"I daresay I could, if I tried."

"I am sure you could, only you must take hold of my arm."

Gilbert languidly raised himself; his helplessness of late had been no punishment to him in one way, he liked to be waited on and helped, and was always used to it.

"Come to the window," his aunt said; "this is the last day of January, and I could almost fancy there is just a whisper of coming spring in the song of the birds in the plantation; and look, Gilbert, there are numbers of crocuses out. Everything is springing into life after winter's sleep, or thinking about it. Oh! Gilbert, dear boy, God has been very good to you; you *are* thankful?"

They had turned back to the sofa again. Gilbert sat down. He was silent; his aunt did not like to press him, and took a book, and said—

"Shall I read, dear?"

"Yes, please."

Just then Brooks appeared, to say Mrs. Crofton would like Master Gilbert to take tea in her room. Gilbert looked disappointed, but said—

"Very well; tell mamma I'll come in half an hour."

"Shall I send Jenkins, Master Gilbert?"

"No; at least we'll ring if we want him."

Brooks left the room; and then Gilbert said—

"*Aunt Amabel.*"

"*Yes, dear.*"

"You have been very kind to me since I've been ill. You wont give me up, will you?"

His aunt smiled.

"Certainly not, Gibbie."

"Because I am very disagreeable, I know, sometimes, and you looked so grave when I upset the chessboard in a huff last evening, after Amy had taken such pains to put it so as I could see to play from the sofa."

"I might look grave, and I *was* sorry, Gilbert."

"Well, I shall never be good, as I told you before, but I mean to *try*. I want to ask you about that breaking of the ice. Now, you know, I was told not to go on, and I heard Mrs. Bond, who can't bear me, saying to Brooks, in the dining-room—'How it was a *judgment* on me, my being so ill and Percy not the worse for it, as I was unruly and disobedient, and he came on the ice to save me.' Aunt Amabel, that puzzles me; it makes me shiver now when I think of the cold water rushing up all round and feeling no bottom, and that I might go down any minute. Was it a judgment?"

"My dear boy, I think God meant to teach you and Percy both a lesson—you one of *obedience* and him one of *humility*."

"Oh! He's good, I know that; but I think it's dreadful to call it a judgment."

"Mrs. Bond knows no better, dear Gilbert; it is her way of expressing it. But it was a *warning*; you will not neglect it?"

"No, Aunt Amabel, I will try."

“That’s right, Gibbie; learn the danger of forgetting your *promise* and the danger of disobedience; learn thankfulness for your preservation, and show it in deeds, not in words, for the time to come.”

“I wish you were going to stay here. Mamma is very kind, and all that, but she loves me so, and thinks I am right when I’m wrong. Papa is too kind, and what I’ve heard the servants say is very true—‘I’m spoiled up to my eyes!’ ”

“Well, Gilbert, you must do your part—*not* to be spoiled; try to give up little things; to deny yourself; to apply to your lessons when you are well, and your tutor comes, and if the choice lies between what pleases yourself and what pleases others, choose the last, and you will not be far wrong. But I have preached long enough now. Are you going to try to walk up to your mamma’s room? I expect the carriage will be home every minute.”

“Yes, I’ll try.”

But Gilbert lingered.

“Shall I ring for Jenkins?”

“No, Aunt Amabel. I only wanted to ask your pardon for all the nasty, spiteful things I said when you first came, which you have repaid by nursing me as nobody else could, and never being touchy or cross with me once. I wish you could love me a little, though I don’t expect you can.”

Poor Gilbert’s woe-begone face touched his aunt.

“Oh! Gilbert, I love you very much;” and *with falling tears*, which she could not repress,

Mrs. Crofton drew the poor boy to her and gave him a fond maternal embrace, such as, on rare occasions, Percy only knew.

Gilbert managed to walk upstairs by slow degrees, and his mother's surprise was great.

"Oh! it will be too much for him!"

"Oh! no, it wont, mamma; I am ever so much better."

The voice was cheery—quite unlike the whine which used to irritate Percy.

Aunt Julia's was a very pretty room, and they were just comfortably settled when the carriage wheels were heard.

"Mamma, may they all have tea here to-night? *please* do."

"If you like, darling, but I hope they will be quiet."

The hall door opened, and Percy's and Harry's voices were heard.

"Aunt Amabel, do go and tell them," said Gilbert, "and say they must bring all they have bought in here."

"Don't excite yourself, dear boy," said his mother, as his aunt left the room, "or you will be ill."

Mrs. Crofton's room was soon crowded, Uncle Hubert heading the procession. Everybody seemed to have a parcel to carry, and grandpapa's was such a big one, while behind Jenkins could be seen bringing numbers more.

"Papa! grandpapa! I walked upstairs!"

"That's famous. And how is mamma?" said Colonel Crofton. "Shall we be too much for her?"

"Not if they don't all talk at once. But do let us have some tea before those things are opened."

"An excellent move," said grandpapa.

And so the teacups were brought, and the parcels heaped up on a sofa, while the children went to take their things off, scarcely able to believe that they were to have tea in Aunt Julia's room.

After tea the parcels were undone, grandpapa presiding over this, and the table conveniently placed, that Gilbert might have a good look at everything. The Bible and Prayer Book for Mark came first, and very strong and handsome they were; and a pen and ink were put before Uncle Hubert for the important operation of writing the name. Uncle Hubert thought a moment, and then wrote—

"Mark Farrant. In remembrance of December 30, 1852. From his grateful friends;" here each of the boys signed his name—"Gilbert St. John Crofton and Percy Ralph Crofton."

"Now let mamma put in a text," said Harry; "she always does in our books—in our good books, I mean."

"Well done, little Harry," said his grandfather; "a very good idea. Come, Amabel; you'll have time to think while we see about the rest of the cargo. Here, Harry, that's for you."

"A stereoscope! Oh! grandpapa."

And then followed a beautiful illustrated edition of "Longfellow's Poems" for Amy, and a paint-box, of a superior kind, well fitted and furnished, for Percy and Mark's drawing-box; a travelling bag

fitted up for Aunt Julia, and one exactly like it for Percy's mother.

"There ought to be something else," said Gilbert, anxiously.

His father nodded.

"It's inside, my boy."

So, when Mrs. Crofton opened and admired her bag, she found a small green leather case, and inside was a locket, set round with beautiful stones, which opened like a little watch, and showed a lock of Gilbert's light hair, and engraved with her initials, while round it was—"In grateful remembrance of January, 1852—from Gilbert."

Mrs. Crofton could scarcely keep back her tears; but the children's joy with their presents was so great she could not damp it. How little that first evening, when she and her three children had stood in the hall, strangers at Rookwood Manor, did she anticipate anything like this! Gilbert's grateful love, his father and grandfather's warm affection, and Aunt Julia saying—"I chose the pattern of the locket, Amabel; I hope you like it."

Colonel Crofton saw that words would not come from the full heart, and hastened to direct attention by saying—

"Well, Gilbert, you don't ask for your present."

"It will be here to-morrow morning, but is too big to bring upstairs," said grandpapa. "Tell him, Amy, what it is."

"A dear little basket carriage, Gilbert, for you to drive, just fit for Diamond, and I am to go with you."



Gilbert looked delighted. And then followed a history of the day at Colerich; of Dr. Brush's delight at Amy's voice unaccompanied; how he had played to them after service in the cathedral, and that she and little Hannah had sung a duet together, and a great many people had been there to listen.

Soon the dressing-bell rang for the elders, and only Percy was in the drawing-room after dinner. The others were so tired, they went early to bed.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### MARK'S PRESENTS.

THE basket-carriage came round with Diamond in it the next morning. It was not fine enough for Gilbert to venture, and Mr. Malton, the kind Morley doctor, said he must sun himself on the terrace some day when the wind was warm, before he attempted more. But Gilbert had the pleasure of seeing everybody driven round to the lodge and back again, by his father, in turn. He stood at the library window, and his Aunt Amabel thought, as he smiled and kissed his hand to her, what a different expression that was kindling in the light blue eyes, and lingering round the thin lips which used to have such a peevish, drawn look about them. *Gilbert was learning that highest of earthly pleasures, the rejoicing in the pleasures of others.*

I do hope many boys and girls who have wise and kind fathers and mothers, will try to think gently of the faults of any of their little friends who may be over-indulged in *their* homes, and not taught to think of anything but *self*-gratification.

Percy's judgment of Gilbert in these first days of their acquaintance, had been a *hard* one. We have seen, when the question of Gilbert's *life* hung in the balance, how bitterly he reproached himself for it.

That evening the grand presentation of the books and the drawing-box to Mark Farrant came off. Mark looked and felt dreadfully shy and awkward, when the library door opened and shut him in, in the presence of the whole family party and Mr. Foster, who had been dining at the Manor. Mark almost made a *rush* to get out again; but I suppose, thinking that impossible, he stood as near the door as he could, twisting his cap, and rubbing that thick stock of light carrotty hair of his by turns.

"Come in, Mark," said old Mr. Crofton, a person of whom Mark stood in such awe, that the invitation to *come in* seemed to make him wish to *get out*, more than ever.

But Mark shuffled up to the table, and then Gilbert and Percy came to him with the books, and Gilbert said—

"You are to keep them, Mark, to remember that night, you know; and that they may remind you how grateful Percy and I are."

"Yes," said Percy, seizing Mark's rough hand,

“I have told you so twenty times, but I must tell you again—I shall never forget it.”

Poor Mark! in vain he tried to mutter out something about “he was sure they were very welcome,” and “it was just nothing.”

Mrs. Crofton pitied his embarrassment, and told Amy to give him the drawing-box, and old Mr. Crofton bid him take it home carefully, and Colonel Crofton said—

“Look in the right-hand corner, Mark, and lift the lid of the little box, there.”

Then old Mr. Crofton said a few stately but hearty words of commendation and gratitude; and Mr. Foster, seeing Mark’s face growing redder every minute, took pity on him, and said—

“Mark, my boy, you did for these young gentlemen what they would have done, I hope, for you in like case; but you were strong and courageous, and you must suffer us to thank you for saving their lives, which, with God’s help, you undoubtedly did!”

Then with a few more murmurs on Mark’s part, and shaking of hands from the little Croftons, Mark edged backwards to the door again, and was down the drive, and in at the door of the lodge, where his father and mother lived, in no time, parcels and all.

The outcries of astonishment from his little brothers and his mother might almost have been heard at Rookwood. Mark found his tongue, too, and displayed his treasures

“There’s books for you; and there’s summat in

the box besides drawing things. I don't know what it is myself, yet."

The bank note for five pounds was handed from father to mother.

"There's no mistake, Mary, do you think?" said his father.

"No; old Mr. Crofton was always liberal, like. But lor! it is a thing! you must put it into the savings' bank at Colerich next market-day, Mark, my boy!"

"I never heard the like," was all Mark could say. "Why, I only got a ducking—a cold one, it's sure, but what was that? Besides, 'twas my fault, building that there snow-house in a thaw; though to be sure you can't use the snow for building when 'twill freeze; still, 'twas my fault, like. But I *am* pleased to have these things! I'll give you the money, father; you and mother can buy lots of things with it! But ain't these beautiful?" said Mark, laying his hand gently and fondly on the books; "and hark what's wrote in!"

There was a silence.

"You read it, mother, I can't;" and Mrs. Farrant, who was something of a scholar, having once been Miss Crofton's maid at the Manor, read the inscription in a slow, solemn voice, adding the texts from the Bible to what we already know was written there. In the Bible, it was—"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth;" and in the Prayer Book—"In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence, and His children shall have a place of refuge."

*There were a great many happy hearts at Rook-*

wood that night, and none more so than in the gardener's cottage.

Mrs. Crofton sat alone with grandpapa long after all the children were in bed.

"You are very kind," she was saying, "oh! very kind. But I think we must all go home again to Bayley-bridge; that is——"

"But I say *no*," said old Mr. Crofton; "and here comes Hubert to back me. Rookwood Manor is big enough for all. Let Percy and Gilbert strengthen the friendship now begun; let them have the same tutor, and go together to Eton, when poor Gilbert is ready."

But Mrs. Crofton looked doubtful.

"Do not think me ungrateful, but I question if this would be good for Percy; a life of luxury here would not fit him for the toil of a profession, which you know lies before him."

"But, Amabel, you wouldn't risk my father's offer of sending Percy to Eton, and let him pick up second-rate Greek and Latin at Bayley-bridge Grammar School instead?" said Colonel Crofton. "Think what I owe you for your care of my boy! Think how he loves you, and what use Percy's companionship may be to him! Don't refuse us! Think of Amy, too, and the pleasure and pride my father has in her!"

Mrs. Crofton begged for a day or two to decide, and the result was, that she and her children were, after Midsummer, to occupy a small house in a large, *pretty garden*, just beyond the Vicarage, which was *vacant*, and which, though old and rambling, was

capable of improvement, which grandpapa and Uncle Hubert were to superintend.

Mrs. Crofton liked this plan best, as being more independent; and I think she was right. But Gilbert's sad face when Percy's departure was named made Mrs. Crofton also decide on leaving Percy behind, while she went back to Bayley-bridge with Hannah and Amy and Harry, and settled her affairs there, and gathered together her small possessions—small, but precious, some of the few things she had reserved from the sale at Acton Vicarage three years before.

Mr. Vivian, the tutor, was to arrive on the 20th February, and on the 23rd Mrs. Crofton was to leave Rookwood. She knew Percy must leave her wing some day—she knew he was already above her teaching, and she felt this three months' absence would be a good test of his principles; but she felt it, oh! how keenly!

The afternoon before they parted, she and Percy sat alone by the window of their room. Percy was not in the best spirits. Gilbert had been rather provoking that day, and Percy had nearly lost his temper, and Mr. Vivian had taken Gilbert's part in a way which seemed not quite just to Percy.

"What a soft, sweet evening," said his mother; "I can hardly believe I shall be looking out on the red brick houses of Savile-street to-morrow, and shall have left Percy behind me."

"Oh! mother, I wish I were going too."

"Don't say that, Percy, or you will break down my courage." But when Percy knelt down by her

and held her hands tight, pressing his face on them, his mother had to make a strong effort. "Dear boy, it will be good for you; Gilbert is fond of you now; think what an influence for good you may have over him; think how this friendship of your two cousins may have the most happy results. Then there are the advantages to yourself. Mr. Vivian's scholarship instead of very insufficient lessons in Bayley-bridge Grammar School; then there is your health; how charming will be the rides on Diamond or the new pony, and all out-door enjoyments as the spring advances! Percy, it is the best thing for you, I am well satisfied."

"Suppose I get cross with Gilbert again—suppose Aunt Julia goes on with him till I get angry, mamma. I like Gilbert now, and shall never forget *that* time; but I may get into trouble all the same."

"Percy, there is help for all difficulty, my dear boy. You wont forget that. Say, 'Hold *Thou* me up,' and *He will*. Be courageous, and make the best use of all your advantages, and soon, May will come, and we shall be altogether once more. Percy, my Percy, you *wont* disappoint me?"

Percy felt a choking in his throat, and could not bear even his mother to see his tears; so with a great hug he rushed out of the room. Mrs. Crofton sat where he left her, sad and motionless, looking out on the landscape, over which the shadows were fast gathering, and listening to the cawing of the rooks—the dear familiar scene of her early days, when she *and Percy's father* were joyous children at the Manor *together*.

A tap at the door, and Gilbert came in.

"Aunt Amabel, it was so good of you to let Percy stay. I will try hard to make him happy. I am afraid I shall be selfish and horrid sometimes; but *I see* it now, and I didn't before; so that there is hope that I shall mind, isn't there, Aunt Amabel?"

"Yes, Gilbert, dear; great hope."

"I love you all," said Gilbert, "every one; and in time I think you will love me better—after having been so disagreeable, I can't expect it all at once."

The real humility was very touching, and Mrs. Crofton asked God that Gilbert might have strength to gain the victory over self, and Percy be lowly in his own eyes and *patient*. These prayers were woven nightly for both the boys before Mrs. Crofton lay down to rest, and they were especially heard and answered. Gilbert was allowed to see the tears which had been hidden from Percy, and poor Gibbie made many a grimace, and listened to all his aunt's wise and tender advice, with the real desire to be what she wished him; and the interview was only ended by Harry running in to say, "Hannah had squeezed in his bow and arrows after all."

"I hope it wont be broken, Harry," said his mother; "but where do you mean to shoot at Bayley-bridge? Unless you mean to take aim at the old cats which sit on the balcony over the grocer's shop opposite."



## CHAPTER XII.

## ROOKWOOD IN SUMMER.

A FINE evening, and *such* an evening! the full glory of summer was lying over all things. The trees in their first freshness; the roses scenting the air with their perfume; the birds singing in chorus of joyful thanksgiving, and the moon just rising, while the richest sunset glow was still lingering in the west. In the old house by the Vicarage of Rookwood, there is all the pleasure of preparation. Mrs. Bond and Brooks are high busy giving a finishing touch to the muslin curtains in the drawing-room, and gathering up from the curtains in the dining-room, where tea is ready, a stray rose leaf or two, which have dropped from the nosegay in the centre of the table. Mrs. Crofton leans back in a chair near the window, and in her white muslin dress, and dark roses in her hair, she is very ornamental.

"Who would believe it is the same house?" she says, as grandpapa comes in at the low French window from the garden, and looks round on every thing with a pleased air.

"No; it's a nice home for them poor things. I hope they will like it. Where are the boys?"

"Oh! at the gate, watching for the carriage. It's *nearly nine*; how long the days are!"

*Aunt Julia* yawns and leans back.

"I hope Gilbert has his cap, or he will catch cold."

"Hush! there are wheels."

Yes; the carriage was coming near, winding under the high bank which shut out the grounds of the Manor, past the pond, now lying calm and clear under the summer sky, down the road which leads to the Vicarage, which it passes with a sweep, round the corner, in at the white gate, where two boys raise their hats and give a cry of welcome, and run on beside it till it drives up before the door of "The Nest," as the house is called, and the weary travellers are at home.

*Home* indeed. Percy is in his mother's arms; one look into those clear honest eyes, and she *feels* it is all well. Amy is lifted out next by Uncle Hubert and seized by Gilbert. Then Harry—more asleep than awake, for the journey had been long and the day hot; and old Hannah descends from the box, and Neptune rubs his nose against her, half affronted that the rest are too busy to notice him; and grandpapa, with stately grace, gives his arm to Mrs. Crofton, and says—

"Welcome home, Amabel."

While Aunt Julia kisses all in turn, and says, "Well, Gilbert, you will be happy now, I suppose?"

Six months before the same travellers had arrived at the Manor, and how changed were the feelings of all!

The next day was Sunday—a bright glorious June Sunday. With the song of early birds Amy's sweet voice was heard in soft, low tones, as she

sung a simple childish hymn to greet the first Sunday in her new home. Percy was out in the garden by nine o'clock, and Amy and Harry followed him. They gathered a lovely bunch of white roses, which were laid on their mother's plate when she came down to breakfast.

It seemed as if Amy and Harry could never admire the Nest enough; and Percy was delighted to show how grandpapa had put a window out here, and cut down some shrubs there, and raised the nice high bank up the side, where was a view into the grounds of the Manor, of the blue water—the scene of that memorable winter evening's danger, and of the heath stretching far away, over which early birds and industrious bees were fluttering before the heat of the day should set in.

The Vicarage was the nearest neighbour to the Nest, and Mr. Foster appeared with hearty greeting, just as they were all sitting down to breakfast, and said he could not refuse a cup of coffee in honour of the settlement at the Nest.

Soon the village bell began to chime, and at almost the first sound Gilbert and Uncle Hubert came in. Gilbert was very much improved in appearance, and his Aunt Amabel noticed with such pleasure how cordially the two boys greeted one another. Grandpapa and Mrs. Hubert Crofton arrived next, and the whole family walked to church together.

The Manor-house pew was full of thankful hearts; *but Percy little knew what a song of thanksgiving arose for him from his mother's breast. It seemed*

as if her husband's mantle was resting on her and his children in no common way that day.

There were many greetings after church—the Farrants foremost. Mark's honest face was shining with satisfaction, and he showed his white teeth in one prolonged grin.

The rest of the day was spent at the Manór. Aunt Amabel was tired, and did not go to church again. Amy stayed with her mother. The window of the drawing-room was open, and the sights and sounds of the country in June were so refreshing after the street noises at Bayley-bridge.

“Mamma, what a change it is!” said Amy; “sometimes I think it must all be a dream.”

“Yes, dear; but nothing to me is so wonderful as to see Percy and Gilbert, and to hear Uncle Hubert's and grandpapa's report of them.”

“What did Uncle Hubert say?”

“That Mr. Vivian considers Percy's talents of a very superior order; but that is but a small part of the praise. The way he has helped Gilbert out with his lessons, and never put himself before him, or tried to win notice at his expense, is the best part. Oh! Amy, I was so afraid for Percy, and this three months' trial has fully answered; there is not a complaint made against him.”

“And Gilbert, mamma?”

“Grandpapa says Gilbert is wonderfully improved, and that Percy's forbearance has scarcely failed at all. Gilbert returns him the strongest affection, and they have helped each other on, and been a *mutual pleasure*. He says they must not be separ-

rated, and when Mr. Vivian's year is over they are both to go to Eton together."

"Oh! mamma! I am so glad, and how glad papa would have been!"

"He would, indeed."

And then Mrs. Crofton's thoughts went back to summer days at Rookwood, when her life was in its spring, and blessed God for His goodness to her fatherless children.

Silence followed as Amy and her mother sat in the large room, with its cool shadow of green blinds, and the fragrance from the flower-beds and climbing roses entering at the open windows. At last voices were heard approaching, and Gilbert and Percy came in at the window.

"It's so dreadfully hot," said Gilbert, in something of his old languid manner, and he sunk into an easy chair. His mother's fan lay near, and he took it up, and began fanning himself.

Percy laughed.

"Well done, Gilbert; shall I get you a smelling-bottle?"

"Thank you," said Gilbert, taking the joke, "and perhaps you will put some eau-de-Cologne on my handkerchief."

It was quite good-temperedly that Percy continued to banter his cousin, and Mrs. Crofton got anxious lest the joke should go too far; but no, it only ended with Gilbert saying—

"What a giant you are, Percy; never tired, *never hot*, and never done up. You'll be going *some expedition up the Niger next*, I expect."

"I shan't take you, if I do; you'd want too much attention, and stop progress. Here, grandpapa, sit here."

And Percy rose courteously as his grandfather arrived with Harry, looking really tired with the walk from church.

The whole party soon collected, and then came tea and a stroll in the grounds, and some of Amy's sweet singing of sacred songs, which always made melody in the hearts of the listeners.

The inhabitants of the Nest were accompanied to the gate by some of those from the Manor.

The boys were laying plans for the next day, and having an argument as to which pony should be given up for the basket carriage, and devoted to Amy's service. Presently Gilbert fell back by his aunt's side.

"It's so nice and jolly to have got rid of old Vivian for two months, and to have you, Aunt Amabel. May I come to the Nest of a morning, if the others have any lessons?"

"Yes, Gilbert dear, indeed you shall."

"Aunt Amabel, since I've been well again, it has been harder not to get into old ways; but I *have* tried!"

"Oh! Gibbie, I am so glad."

"Yes, I am sure I have tried; but I am awfully bothered with my lessons, and Mr. Vivian thinks I am stupid, and of course likes Percy best. I don't grudge him that, for I know Percy is clever; but I shall be glad when our time with Vivian is up."

"Come, Gilbert," said his father, "we must turn

back now ;” and he had only time to add, “ Percy has been so capital all this time, I shan’t mind being with him a bit, I believe.” Then good nights were said, and the cousins separated.

Summer stillness hovered over the Nest ; the stars came out in the deep blue of the sky. Now and then a thrush sent out a gush of song, and was silent again. The lambs were asleep in the fold—tender birds in their nests—a bat wheeled past the window by which Mrs. Crofton sat, and made a momentary stir, then all was quiet again. The Sunday evening readings was over, and the children had all gone upstairs. There was a murmur now and then from the kitchen, where Hannah, and the little rosy-faced maiden, who was to be her assistant in household matters, sat together. Suddenly the door was gently opened, it was Percy.

“ What is it, Percy ?”

“ I left a book here I shall want in the morning. No candles yet, mamma ?”

“ No ; I am enjoying the evening.”

“ Dear mother (Percy went up to her), is it all well ?”

“ My Percy, outwardly I know it is. I have heard such a report of you, from grandpapa and Uncle Hubert, and poor Gilbert, as has made my heart rejoice ; but Percy, the *inner* life—is *it well* there ?”

“ I hope so, mother. It is hard sometimes ; I feel *dreadfully* self-satisfied, and contemptuous often, *and all that* ; but I fight against it. I don’t let it *get the better* of me. And my hot temper, too, I try

to govern it; but, mamma, it *is* a *battle*, I can tell you."

His mother drew him to her, and kissed him. "God is on your side, Percy, look up for help when the strife is the hottest; but never give in."

"No; I shan't."

"I think Gilbert loves you, Percy; he says so."

"Yes; poor Gilbert, that he does; and mamma, he is immensely improved," said Percy heartily; "but it's all your doing from first to last. Sweet mother mine, good-night."

We must bid good-by, to the cousins now. I shall be so glad that if out of the story of the Croftons, any boy or girl who reads it may gather a lesson. Gilbert and Percy will have many a trial yet; many rough places in their daily journey; many times the struggle will be great. *Sometimes* they will fail. But with them, as with every one of you, dear children, it *must* be a struggle. You have seen a rapid river, perhaps, the tide setting strong in one direction, and men in a boat *rowing hard* against the tide. If they put down their oars a minute, back goes the boat, they lose time, and are carried backwards by the force of the current. So with you, dear children, you must row hard against the tide of *anger, self-will, pride—of indolence, self-indulgence, and self-pleasing*. Give way, now you are young, to these, and you will drift *back* with the stream, and though the flowers may look pleasant and bright by your side, and it may be very *easy* work to give up the struggle, *believe me, it will be harder toil later in the day to take up the oars, and try to get*



back the way you have lost. You are *not* alone in the effort—there is help—and there is not only help, but it is *sure* help. It cometh from the hills; it is from Him who made heaven and earth, and who will not suffer the feet of the weakest lamb of the fold to stumble, if only they keep close to Him, and trust Him. He will guide their feet till they come to the city whose Builder and Maker is God, and even in this world—

- “ We cannot hide that some have striven  
Achieving calm, to whom was given  
The joy that mixes man with Heaven.
- “ Who, rowing *hard* against the stream,  
Saw distant gates of Eden gleam,  
And did not dream it was a dream.
- “ Who did accomplish their desire,  
Bore, and *forbore*, and did rest tire;  
Like *Stephen*, an unquenchèd fire.
- “ *He* heeded not reviling tones,  
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,  
Tho' cursed, and scorned, and bruised with stones
- “ But, looking upward, full of grace,  
He prayed, and from a happy place  
God's glory smote him on the face.”

THE END.

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